THE OLDEST OF FOUR

AMY BELL MARLOWE

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THE OLDEST OF FOUR

BOOKS FOR GIRLS

By AMY BELL MARLOWE

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THE OLDEST OF FOUR
Or Natalie's Way Out

THE GIRLS OF HILLCREST FARM
Or the Secret of the Rocks

A LITTLE MISS NOBODY
Or With the Girls of Pinewood Hall

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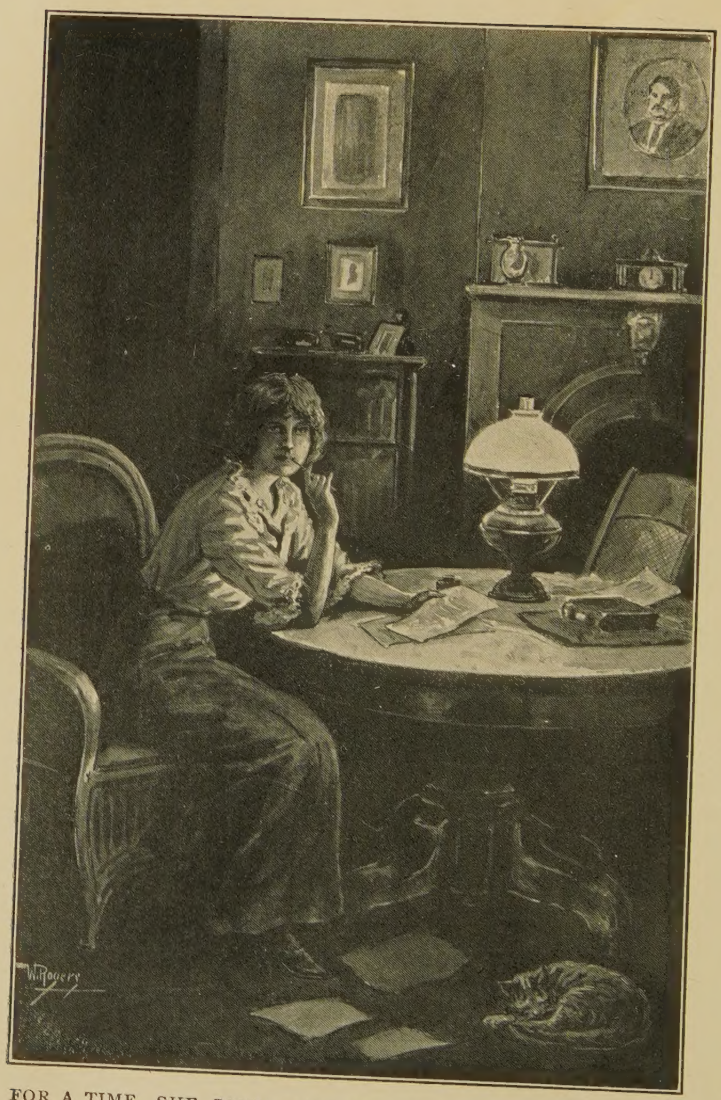

FOR A TIME, SHE COULD NOT GET AHEAD ON THE BOOK.

Frontispiece (Page 170.)

THE OLDEST OF FOUR

OR

NATALIE'S WAY OUT

BY

AMY BELL MARLOWE

AUTHOR OF
THE GIRLS OF HILLCREST FARM,
A LITTLE MISS NOBODY, ETC.

Illustrated

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GROSSET & DUNLAP
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The Oldest of Four

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THE OLDEST OF FOUR

CHAPTER I

THE GREATEST DAY OF HER LIFE

"MUMMY-KINS! Mummy-kins! My best shoe's all busted out in the back. How can I go to Nat's commencement with a burst shoe? Will you tell me *that* now?"

Laura Raymond's voice rang like a trumpet call through the little cottage on Vesey Street.

"I noticed that there were two buttons off the same shoe, too, dear," was the reply, in Mrs. Raymond's quiet tones. "Had you sewed the buttons on you would surely have seen the 'busted back,' as you call it, in time to have taken the shoe to the cobbler."

"I know, I know, Mummy-kins. *'Mea culpa!'*"

"Less Latin and more buttons on your shoes, young lady," exclaimed Natalie, coming from her own room, dressed, hatted, and with her new parasol in her hand, looking "so sweet," Laura declared, that the fly-away sister had to jump up from the top of the flight (she dressed all over the house in a most scandalous way and was button-

ing her shoes on the stairs) and hug and kiss the heroine of the hour.

Can you imagine any girl named Natalie who was not a brunette? And Natalie Raymond had the oval face, the blue-black hair, the deep, shaded, languid black eyes, the thin, finely-chiseled nose, and the darkling roses in the cheek, of the most satisfactory type of brunette.

Natalie Raymond was not merely pretty; she radiated intelligence. When she was animated her eyes sparkled, and the color came and went in her cheeks with every breath. When she was indignant Laura called her an Italian brigand—a very "lady-like" one, of course! And when she was pensive, her father called her "Madonna."

Natalie was a reminiscence of a former generation of Raymonds. A hundred years back, a certain Raymond who was wealthy, traveling in Italy, had fallen in love with and married an Italian girl of a good but poverty-stricken family.

Natalie's beauty was of the type of that ancestress, although the Raymonds themselves were fair, and inclined to be stout—both men and women—when they were fully grown, with tawny hair and plenty of color. Laura was of the Raymond type.

"And I hate it," the lively twelve-year-old often declared. "We Raymonds might be manufac-

tured by the mile and cut off by the yard. But Natalie—well, nobody ever *was* quite like Nat!"

And this was Natalie's great day—as she said herself, it was the greatest day of her life.

She was graduating at the head of her class from the Burlingboro High School, and was to deliver the valedictory. She was sixteen that very week and it did seem as though there was only one tiny cloud on her horizon.

Her father, Frank Raymond, could not be home in time to see Natalie graduate. He had hoped to be back from a long southern business trip in good season for the great occasion.

But three days before, instead of his appearance, as they had expected, in bodily form, had come a letter stating that he would have to remain in Havana until the sailing of the next steamer.

He was on the way now, of course; but he would land in New York too late for the run to Burlingboro by train in season to hear the oldest of his four daughters read the farewell of her class.

"If father could only be here," sighed Natalie, when Laura kissed her at the top of the stair-flight, "I should be perfectly, perfectly happy."

But mother was well enough to attend the exercises, and Natalie was grateful for that blessing. For mother was not always strong enough to go out. Many days she lay on the couch in

her own room, and the girls had to do the housework and "scramble together the eats," as Laura said, as best they might.

Of course, Rose was big enough to help now, for she was eight; but Lucille was but four, and—it must be confessed—a great deal more bother than she was help, to say the least.

Now Mrs. Hackett would come through the hole in the fence from the rear alley and look out for the two youngsters while mother accompanied Laura to see the oldest of the four receive her diploma.

Natalie went first. She tripped along the sidewalk in her immaculate white shoes, dodging the puddles left from last night's rain. It had been a hard rain with a wind that howled around the house most miserably, and Natalie heard her mother moving restlessly in her bed.

A wild night, and father on the sea! She had known that the thought worried her mother.

But the day had broken so beautifully, with the whole world washed so clean, that nobody had mentioned the tempest that had raged up the coast during the night.

"'Lo, Natalie!"

Natalie raised the edge of her parasol to see. A negro was wheeling the invalid chair out of the Hurleys' grounds, and Jim was smiling broadly

at her, with his ebony crutches held over his shoulder like a gun.

The Hurleys had beautiful grounds, their house sitting on a terraced embankment, with velvety lawns and lovely shrubbery. The place occupied a whole square at the most fashionable end of Vesey Street.

"How nice you look in your black suit, Jim," said Natalie, walking beside the chair.

"Huh! Just like a waiter," grunted the crippled youth. "If it wasn't for my hydroplanes," and he tapped the ebony crutches, "they'd think I came to wait on table at the class supper to-night. That'll be jolly, Nat!"

"I reckon so," said Natalie, happily.

He was smiling up at her rather wistfully.

"How pretty you look, Nat. But, then, you always *are* pretty. Only you look sort of—of—transfigured to-day. I guess that's the word I want," and Jim laughed again.

Natalie laughed, too.

"You really *are* getting on, Jim. Paying compliments to the girls, and all that. Why, you'll be quite a lady's man yet."

"No," said the boy, his usually cheerful face suddenly falling into graver lines. "Never *that*. Girls won't care much to look at a fellow like me."

She laid a suddenly tender hand on his shoulder. "Jimmy-boy, I never yet saw you when you were not good to look upon. You have the cheerfulest face of any boy who goes to High—everybody says so. And it takes *pluck*—I know! I admire you, Jim."

"Do you, Natalie?" he cried, suddenly grabbing at her hand, squeezing it hard, and then dropping it and blushing. "Well, you know we all admire *you*. Mutual admiration society—eh? Look out for that curb ahead, Mose."

"Yes, sah! Yo' trus' de pilot, sah. I done seen dat curb a mile away."

The black man rolled his eyes and grinned. There was not a soul around the Hurley premises who would not have done anything in the range of possibility for Jim.

Others of the high school pupils joined them—some of the graduating class. Jim Hurley could not longer afford to be either pensive or sentimental. It was *his* business to be the life of any crowd he was in—and, as Natalie said, it took pluck to do it!

They rustled into the big hall, the members of the graduating class taking their seats on the platform. The other pupils filled the gallery. The adult audience crowded the floor.

It was a brilliant assemblage—and a happy one.

The white dresses of the girls, the knots of varicolored ribbons denoting the colors of the various classes, the pretty decorations, and above all the profusion of flowers, made the hall look like fairy-land.

And who among them—among the graduating class—would ever forget that waning June afternoon, when everything—earth, and air, and sky, and all—seemed to have formed a conspiracy to make this a perfect, perfect day?

Natalie found her eyes moistening as she looked about at the girls and boys with whom she had studied and romped for so long. This was the end. This was really the Great Day—there never could be another like it in her life, or in theirs.

For to the Burlingboro youth, school life ended with graduation from the high school. It was not a college town, nor did many of the Burlingboro parents send their children to higher institutions of education.

Like the Raymonds, most of the Burlingboro people owned a little home, with a little mortgage on it, a very little sum in bank, and the principal wage-earner of the family usually had very little prospect of ever earning more than he was right then.

There were few " superior " people in Burlingboro. Even the Hurleys, who had more money

than most, had come from such small beginnings that it would have been impossible, had they so wished, to "put on airs" with their old neighbors.

Estelle Maybury was the class poet, and her verses were applauded. Bob Granger was historian. Sally Fitch's prophecy was very, very funny—especially so in the opinion of the members of the graduating class.

And then it came Natalie's turn. Natalie was literary—there could be no doubt of that. From the "very earliest times" it was no trouble at all for Natalie Raymond to write compositions. She always had the very highest marks for anything of that kind.

Nor had she only produced amateur work. Now, for more than a year, she had been writing little juvenile stories, sketches, domestic items, and the like, for the Burlingboro *Banner*.

Not that Mr. Franklin, the editor, could pay for such contributions; but he was willing to pay for having them set up, instead of using syndicate plates.

Natalie, therefore, was "a welcome contributor" to the local paper; but that was a secret that was not divulged outside of the family—only Mr. Franklin knew it, and advised her kindly along certain lines of work.

She had had more than a year, therefore, of professional practise. Is it a wonder, then, that the valedictory of this graduating class was bound to be remembered and quoted by the teachers for years to come?

Not that it was not a girlish production—for it was. But Natalie had learned to put something besides good grammar into her work.

And, withal, it was practical, and practically handled.

"To-morrow there is a whole new world for us to face. And with each to-morrow, there is another.

"If we fail in to-day's world, we may succeed in to-morrow's. And let us not wait, day after day, for some great light to shine upon the open door of opportunity. Do the little thing that is nearest. *That* may be the open door.

"'Next things' should be our motto. The despised way may be our way out!"

There was more of it, and for a young girl it was very good. And they all applauded her to the echo. Jim Hurley caught her eye as she returned to her seat, a little dizzy from all the applause, and he grinned and shook hands with himself in congratulation.

Then came the presentation of diplomas, and at last they were dismissed. They were out in

the world—there was no more " scholastic yoke " to gall—childhood was behind them.

So they all felt.

And Natalie, coming down the long front steps with mother's arm in her own and Laura jabbering away " nineteen to the dozen " on the other side of the frail little lady, heard it first.

The *Banner* had gotten out an early edition. A screeching urchin, with a bundle of the still damp papers under his arm, came whooping through the block.

" Uxtra! Uxtra! All 'bout the sinkin' of the *Sakonnet* off Hat'ras! Hundreds of passengers lost! Uxtra! "

The little mother suddenly flung her arm around Natalie's neck, and raised a pallid, working face to her daughter's, crying:

" Oh, Natalie! That is the steamer your father is on! "

Then she lay a dead, limp weight in Natalie's arms.

CHAPTER II

THE CAPTAIN

THEY got her home in a carriage kindly sent from the Hurley stables. Dr. Protest called in a brother physician and they worked over Mrs. Raymond for hours.

Then the grave-faced family physician, who had ministered to all their needs in time of sickness since Natalie could remember, faced the four in the lamp-lighted sitting-room.

Lucille, not understanding, was merely frightened, and clung with her chubby arms around Natalie's neck. Rose and Laura were now tearless, and listened to the physician in silence. But Natalie understood—keenly.

"It is her mind more than her body," said Dr. Protest, gravely. "And it will continue to be her mind, I fear. Frail as your mother is, we were controlling her nervous trouble and, I feel sure, had this shock not come so inopportunely, she would soon have been her old self again.

"But she has carried a burden on her mind for some time, I fear?"

This last was a question, and Natalie nodded.

"Father's business has not been good of late. He met some heavy losses before he—he went away. Oh, doctor! If he is drowned I don't know what we *shall* do!"

"There, there! *You* can't afford to break down just now, Natalie. You're the captain, at present, you know."

"I—I suppose so," admitted the young girl.

"These others must look to you," continued the physician, in a low voice. "You have the whole responsibility upon your shoulders, my dear girl."

"Oh, doctor! You do not believe that everybody aboard the *Sakonnet* was lost?"

"I do not believe first reports of such a catastrophe at all. Pluck up your courage, Natalie. Sit tight! You must set your sisters an example."

She smiled faintly at him, rocking to and fro to hush Lucille to sleep. Mrs. Hackett was stirring softly about the kitchen, getting tea for them. A good neighbor was in the sick-room above.

The doctor tiptoed out and left the four together.

Laura had cried so much that her voice was now merely a croak, as she demanded:

"Oh, Nat! Whatever shall we do if father is drowned and mother d—d—dies?"

Rose burst into wild sobbing again. She was just big enough to know what both disasters meant.

Natalie still hushed the little girl, and rocked. She bravely quenched a desire to weep just as madly as Rose did.

"Now, Laura," she said, "you are altogether too big a girl to ask a question like that in the hearing of Rose."

"Well! Everybody can't be repressed like you, Nat——"

"And Rose!" added Natalie, to the smaller girl. "Suppose mother hears you upstairs? Do you suppose that is going to help make her well?"

"No-o," admitted the culprit.

A soft tapping at the window startled them for an instant. Natalie put the now sleeping Lucille upon the couch, and opened the inner blinds.

It was dark outside—pitch-black. But suddenly the whites of a pair of rolling eyes, and a glimmer of ivory, indicated a face as black as the night itself.

"Oh, Mose!" exclaimed Natalie, opening the French window.

"'Deed it's me, Missee," said the black man. "Ah didn't like to pull no bell."

"What is it, Mose?"

"Mis' Hurley done instruc' me to arsk aftah Mis' Raymon'."

"She is quiet now; the doctor has just left," replied Natalie. "Tell Mrs. Hurley we are much obliged."

"An' Mis' Nat'lie," whispered the black man, with a manner of great mystery. "Mastah Jim, he say do yo' cheer up. He been workin' de wires to New Yo'k all de ebenin'. De minute de wi'less, or telegraft, gits any news, dey is goin' to let Mastah Jim know, an' he'll send me ober, Missee. Dis chile ain' gwine to baid ternight at all."

"Bless you, Mose!" exclaimed the girl, with a sob. "And tell Jim he is a dear."

"Yassum. Anyt'ing else, Missee?"

"Anything else? No, I guess not, Mose."

"No odder message to Mastah Jim?" queried the old man, rolling his eyes. "Des lak' yo' regards, Missee—or de lak' o' dat?'

"Why, of course, Mose!" exclaimed the girl in surprise. "I thank him far more than I can tell."

"Dat's right, Missee," said the negro, bobbing his head convulsively. "*An'* yo' regards?"

"Yes, yes, Mose. If you wish to put it that way," said the surprised Natalie, and watched the darkey off the porch with puzzled gaze.

But there was something else to think about

besides the vagaries of the Hurleys' old servitor.

She got the younger ones to bed soon after they had eaten the meal Mrs. Hackett had so kindly prepared.

"It do bes the height of folly, Mis' Natalie," declared this good woman, "fur youse to give up hope regyardin' Mister Raymond. Look at me! Whin me Pat—me oldes' bye—wint to the Fullerprunes——"

"The *what?*" gasped Laura, almost choking over her tea.

"The Fullerprunes. 'Tis a place where there was fightin'. 'Twas whin Pat wint to the wars, sure."

"The Philippines," explained Natalie, gravely.

"Yis. Well, he was me oldes'—me darlin'. Though a maner little tyke niver run wild in Burlingboro strates," added his mother, in an aside.

"But whin he wint to the wars, 'twas believin' he was shot iv'ry day, I was! Sure, I had him murdered, an' sint home wid legs an' ar-rms missin' iv'ry day——"

"Pat must be a centipede," whispered Laura, who could not overlook a joke if the heavens fell.

"But," pursued Mrs. Hackett, "he wint t'roo the campaign like a greased rat down a drainpipe! It niver touched him!"

"And he had to face great danger in every skirmish and battle, I suppose, Mrs. Hackett," admitted Natalie.

"Sure an' he did. An' he was in ev'ry scrimmage there was—whin he warn't in the calaboose. An' he warn't scratched. Sure, yer father may have as good luck—why not? I'd not give up hope, me gyurl."

But it was afterward, when she was alone, that Natalie gave her whole mind to the problem that confronted her. Being the oldest of the four girls she had been somewhat in the confidence of her parents.

Mr. Raymond had an interest in the firm for which he traveled. But his share in the profits was governed entirely by the business his own efforts brought in. His salary, therefore, was small and out of it he had to pay his traveling expenses.

This arrangement, for some years, had been a very good one for Mr. Raymond. Out of his income he had bought their home, paying for it in installments. There was now but a thousand dollars' mortgage on the property, the interest being thirty dollars semi-annually.

But during the past few years—since Lucille's birth, in fact—Mrs. Raymond had been an invalid. The doctor's bills had been heavy.

The family often had to have help in the house.

Meanwhile Mr. Raymond's income had been growing smaller. Changes in business was the cause of this to a degree. In his line all traveling men were not doing so well.

For this reason he had decided to extend his territory as far as Jamaica and Cuba. He had to take with him most of their ready money when he had left home two months before.

Bills had collected in his absence. Natalie knew that the salary due her father from Favor & Murch would barely pay these bills.

How well he had done upon this southern trip they did not know. His orders had not been transmitted to the firm. His profits could not be adjusted until the firm filled the orders and the customers paid their bills.

Therefore, if the father and husband had been lost at sea, the oldest daughter very well knew that her mother would be left almost penniless.

"Oh, dear! if Laura and I were only boys," sighed Natalie. "It costs so much more to keep girls. And in an emergency like this, girls seem so helpless.

"Why, if I was a boy, I could start right out to-morrow and get a job—I know I could. And Laura would be old enough and strong enough to

work through the summer as office boy, or the like.

"But who wants a couple of girls?" groaned she. "And they wouldn't pay us much, if we *did* get work. Girls seldom get more than half the pay of boys, no matter what they do."

But she took herself up short when she had got this far. Was *this* being "the captain" of the Raymond crew? She was the oldest. The other girls must look to her for comfort, for advice, for leadership.

Should she fail in the very first emergency that had come into her life? She, who had only that day put her foot into the real world and left childhood behind?

"'Next things' should be our motto. The despised way may be our way out."

"Why, that's just *sound!*" gasped Natalie Raymond. "What 'next thing' can I possibly do? And will you please tell me what despised way is *my* way out?

"What—what a silly little fool I was when I wrote that valedictory!"

CHAPTER III

THE GIRL WHO GREW OLD OVER NIGHT

Mrs. Hackett went home and Natalie locked the lower part of the house. The neighbor who had remained with her mother went back to her own home, too. But she lived near, and if she was needed Natalie could rouse Laura out to call her. The oldest daughter took her place in her mother's room for the night.

Mother was quiet now. The physician had given her an opiate, because that seemed necessary. Quiet was essential if Mrs. Raymond was to recover from the shock she had received.

Natalie lay on the couch; but she could not sleep. Her eyes were wide open. She listened for the first sound outside, or inside, the little cottage.

Oh, dear! If she could only wake up to find it all a bad dream! She would be willing to forget all the pride of graduation day if she could forget with it the terrible trouble that had come upon them.

If father would only come in the morning, and straighten the trouble all out!

Natalie, it was true, shrank from the burden of responsibility that she saw settling upon her. And why should she not?

Up to this time the girl had been as happy and as careless of the future as the majority of well-bred and well-cared-for girls of her age.

The fact that her parents worried over financial matters had merely scratched the surface of Natalie Raymond's mind.

But now, in a flash—in a moment of time, as it appeared—the situation was changed. From being a dependent she had become the staff on which not alone the other three girls must lean, but her invalid mother, as well.

Was she to fail them? Was she to be proven a weakling in this, her first bout with the great world?

"To-morrow there is a whole new world for us to face. And with each to-morrow there is another."

"Oh, dear!" murmured Natalie, tossing on the couch, her hair disarranged, her face burning. "I wish I'd never written that silly thing!"

Of what good were trite phrases now? It was a real condition she faced, not a theory.

The family was fatherless. They were worse than motherless! If everybody gave up to the catastrophe that had overtaken them what then

would become of the Raymonds, large and small?

No, no! Somebody had to go ahead, and be the leader, and overcome difficulties, and plan their future, and even earn the sum necessary to keep them all in food, in clothing, and a shelter over their heads.

It must be Natalie. There was no other way. And, despite the natural shrinking of the gently nurtured girl from the buffetings of the future, she was not really a coward.

There was in her nature a certain determination that friction was to bring to the surface. Soft and demure as she had always seemed, the warp and woof of Natalie Raymond's character was of a kind to resist wear.

She lay awake long hours of this night, it was true. But with the coming of dawn she was established in her future course. She knew what she had to do. Trample on Self. Shoulder the burden Fate had put upon her. Above all, do the unpleasant duty cheerfully!

Her mother slept. Natalie crept down to the kitchen at daybreak. The fire was out, a great heap of dishes stood on the dresser, for Mrs. Hackett had not cleared up when she went home. It seemed to Natalie as though their kitchen had *never* looked so slovenly and shiftless.

She cleaned out the stove, made a brisk fire, heated water, and washed and dried the dishes. Meanwhile she brewed tea and made toast.

Her mother was arousing from her sleep. The tea and toast on a tray were ready for her.

"My daughter! My only comfort!" moaned the poor woman. "What would we do without you?"

"I'm sure I don't know, dear," returned Natalie, composedly. "But having got me, don't worry—that's a good mother. Remember that everything is going on all right, because the oldest of your four is at the helm."

Then she woke Laura and commanded her to keep in call of their mother until breakfast was ready and she could relieve her.

There were eggs in the house, and other provisions—enough for a hearty breakfast, and as the children had eaten but little the night before, Natalie knew they would be hungry.

Soon pattering feet overhead in the "nursery"—the big room where Rose and Lucille slept in a double bed and Laura was mistress of another—forced the oldest sister to mount the stairs again.

"Remember mother must have perfect quiet," she warned the younger ones, gravely. "Don't you *dare* go in there to her—and don't make any noise to disturb her."

Then to Laura, whom she found in the bathroom, she said, severely:

"If I get up and make the fire and cook the breakfast, the least you can do, Laura, is to look after those young ones. Dr. Protest says mother has got to have quiet, and you've got to help."

Laura was languid and heavy-eyed. It was plain that she had cried a good deal.

"I don't see how you can go ahead so, Nat," she protested. "I've been awake most all night, thinking about poor father."

"And I have not had my clothes off," replied Natalie. "Thinking of dear father isn't going to help mother, or run the house, or get food for us."

"Natalie!" exclaimed Laura, under her breath, "you are heartless!"

Her elder sister gave her a patient smile.

"*Somebody* must go ahead. It is my duty, Laura. I must take up the nearest thing at hand——"

"'Next things' should be our motto."

How the phrases of her now despised valedictory kept recurring to her mind! She went downstairs and found Black Mose, the Hurleys' serving man, standing at the back door.

"Mornin', Missee," he said. "Is Mis' Raymond better?"

"I hope so. She is quiet, Mose."

"Dat good! dat good!" chuckled the darkey. "Dey all—*all*—sends deir regyards to yo', Mis' Nat'lie. An' Mastah Jim, he done kep' de blue spark hoppin' all night."

Natalie knew what that meant. Jim Hurley had rigged a wireless instrument in the cupola of the Hurley house, and he was registered as an operator according to Government demand.

Everybody thought it was pretty smart for a cripple to take up wireless telegraphy—and to build his own instrument, and all. And it was. Jim was just as smart as he could be.

"Oh, Mose! has he got any more news than what was in the paper?" cried the girl.

"Yas'm. He done sent you disher paper wot yo' kin read—an' his regyards, Mis'."

Natalie smiled a little over the black man's repetition of that word "regards."

"It is good of him," she said, taking the paper Mose offered. "I hope he had a nice time at the class supper last evening. Tell him——"

"He didn't go ter no supper, Mis' Nat'lie," declared the negro, shaking his head vigorously.

"What!"

"No, Ma'am! He suttenly did not. I done tol' yo' dat we done gwine ter sit up all night. If—if de news comin' ober de wires, or froo de

air, had been sartain sure news, Mis', yo'd been 'woke by Mose—ya-as indeedy!"

"Oh, dear!" cried Natalie. "Did that foolish boy stay up all night? And keep you awake, too, Mose?"

"*Dat* don' matter whatsomever," declared the negro. "Not 'bout *me*. An' Mastah Jim done takin' a snooze now. . . . An' he done send his regyards, Mis'."

Natalie could scarcely repress a nervous giggle. This expression of the black man's was becoming almost as insistent as "Barkis is willin'."

"You go home and take some sleep, too, Mose," she urged him. "And—and give Jim *my* regards."

This seemed to please old Mose immensely, and he went off with shining face, leaving Natalie to open Jim's message slowly and read the following items jotted down by that young wireless operator:

"*Sakonnet* first seen in trouble about noon yesterday by revenue cutter *Malay*. The *Malay* could not run near enough to more than pass signals. *Sakonnet* had cracked her tail-shaft and was out of control. She seemed to have no emergency canvas, or could not spread the sails. She was drifting nor'-nor'-west. Reported by wireless to Fortress Monroe.

"Sighted and reported at two o'clock by *Naida,* of Ford Line, which stood by until dark and took off by her own boats 113 passengers and members of crew. Will arrive in New York at nine to-day. *Sakonnet's* wireless appeared to be useless.

"Maculley Line freight-boat *Pancoast,* bound out from Norfolk for New Orleans, ran down close to *Sakonnet,* and received passengers from two boats and a life-raft. Number not known, as *Pancoast* is not fitted with wireless.

"An outward bound tramp steamship, name and destination unknown, observed by officers of *Naida* approaching wreck of *Sakonnet* when the former steamer was obliged to sheer off and steam north. There were still passengers and officers aboard *Sakonnet,* and they were burning costons.

"Reported at 11:55 to Ship News Service, New York, via wireless from Vandam Shoal lightship, relayed from outward bound Philadelphia Liner *Mohawk,* that she had picked up first officer of *Sakonnet,* boat's crew and fifteen passengers. Passengers not named. *Mohawk* will touch first at Bermudas.

"Only list of passengers received is from Ford Liner, *Naida.* Mr. Raymond not listed. Altogether the *Sakonnet's* owners report 273 passen-

gers, first, second, and steerage, as sailing from Havana.

" It may be that not a soul aboard the *Sakonnet* is lost. At last reports she was still afloat. Mr. Raymond may be on the *Pancoast,* and you will hear from him at New Orleans; or on the *Mohawk,* and you'll learn that when she arrives at the Bermudas; or on the unknown tramp steamship observed by the officers of the *Naida* running down to the help of the wrecked steamer.

" Keep up your pluck.—Jim."

And Natalie, reading the clearly expressed items, *was* encouraged. She was bound to be.

Of course her father's name would not have appeared on the list of passengers rescued by the Ford Line boat. They were the first taken from the wreck, and would be mostly women and children.

Father would never push himself before women in a time of peril—no indeed! There was plenty of chance for him to have been rescued by one of the other steamers mentioned—or even by some other not yet reported.

Natalie knew just how helpful and self-sacrificing her father would be in all the confusion and fright. He had always been a hero in *her* eyes, and he was sure to be one at such a time as this.

But she determined to wait till she saw Dr.

Protest before showing Jim's report to her mother. She read it to the children, however, as soon as they came to breakfast, and then left them digesting the report, becoming momentarily more hopeful, while she went up to sit with her mother.

"Mother's staff and comfort!" murmured Mrs. Raymond, seizing her oldest daughter's hand convulsively. "But, how hard! how hard! What *shall* we do, Natalie? I see no way out——"

"Don't worry so, Mother. Let us hope for the best," Natalie interrupted. "Father may be home any day."

"Have you heard anything?" gasped the invalid.

"Nothing definite," said Natalie, seeing that she must be very circumspect in talking of her father.

Later the city papers arrived in Burlingboro. Another steamer, passing the locality where the *Sakonnet* had become unmanageable, reported picking up two bodies—both of seamen.

The *Sakonnet* had without doubt sunk. Had all been taken from her decks, or not? The uncertainty, it seemed to Natalie, was worse to bear than would be the certainty that Mr. Raymond had been drowned.

CHAPTER IV

"A SURVIVOR OF THE 'SAKONNET'"

NEIGHBORS began to drop in, one by one, to speak in hushed tones in the kitchen, and offer help. But when Dr. Protest came he told Natalie that it would be far better for the patient if she saw nobody about her but the girls themselves.

"I am loath to suggest the engagement of a nurse," said the doctor, who knew the Raymonds' circumstances quite as well as Natalie herself. "And if you girls are careful I believe your mother will get along quite as well without as with one.

"Tell her nothing about this uncertainty. She has already got it fixed in her mind that your father is lost. The see-saw of uncertainty will do her more harm than good.

"When he appears it will be time enough to tell her the good news. I never yet knew of a case where joy killed!"

"You—you speak as though father was sure to come back," said Natalie.

"And so *you* must feel. You are a sensible girl," said the physician, quickly. "You can see

the many chances there are in that report for his escape. You may hear from him immediately."

But they did *not* hear. The steamship *Naida* reached New York, and at quarantine a crowd of reporters swarmed aboard the Ford Liner.

The stories of the catastrophe, as related by the rescued passengers and the few officers and crew aboard the *Naida,* were quite as contradictory as is usually the case at such times.

One passenger spoke of the noble and unselfish conduct of both officers and crew. Another told of how stokers made a rush for the first boat and trampled women under foot, being driven back by the captain himself with a revolver in either hand.

There was every protection possible afforded the passengers. There were plenty of lifeboats, and rafts, and a good supply of cork jackets.

Another declared the cork-belts to be filled with nothing better than sawdust; that the sealed compartments of the rafts burst; that the lifeboats themselves were like punk.

It was a fact that the *Naida* had rescued all these people she had brought to their destination in her own boats. Captain Joyce, of the *Sakonnet,* dared not trust either his boats, or his crews.

Bulletin followed bulletin. Burlingboro was near enough to the big city to be flooded with two

or three editions of the metropolitan papers during the day, and the *Banner* itself got out an early edition, as it had the day before.

The list of passengers sailing on the doomed boat from Havana was gone over by news editors, and Mr. Raymond's name marked. One paper sent an extra into the town with his name emblazoned across the front, and with a bad picture of the missing man and a worse story of his life.

Mr. Raymond had once been a town official, and the newspaper had resurrected the cut and story from its files.

Every time there was a fresh extra on the street, Laura rushed out to buy it. Natalie would have stopped this had she dared; but she was afraid it would only make Laura worse.

The flyaway sister had just so much excitement to work off. If she could do it in this way it was better than to have her burst into paroxysms of uncontrollable sobbing.

Rose and Lucille were very good. Naturally, being children, the keenness of their grief was soon past. Besides, they very much desired to please Natalie and "help make mamma well."

Mrs. Hackett had run in at noon; but the poor woman washed and scrubbed for her daily bread, and was that day working for a neighbor.

"Sure, 'tis gittin' on fine, ye are," she declared.

"Ah, Mis' Nat'lie, 'tis the sma-r-t gyurl I allus said you'd be—an' ye're provin' it. An angel out of heaven couldn't have cl'aned up this kitchen no n'ater than you, an' that's no lie."

Many of her schoolfellows came to see Natalie, too. They had missed her at the class-supper. There she should have presided, as president of the class.

As far as Natalie could learn, Jim Hurley was the only other member who kept away from the class celebration. Sally Fitch, indeed, was quite noisy while she was in the house. Natalie was glad to have her go.

All these school affairs seemed of so little interest to her now. Over night she had grown out of such childish interests.

She sent Laura to market; but Laura was a reckless buyer, and Natalie, counting the little sum left in her mother's purse, saw that they must be much more economical than before.

"I must do the buying myself. Some things we must curtail. And there are bills that must now be paid, for the tradesmen will be worried by the report that father is drowned."

So this young girl discussed in her own mind the domestic situation which she faced. She must be eminently practical. She had no time for tears or for idle speculation.

About dark, as she was getting supper, she heard the roll of Jim Hurley's chair-wheels on their plank walk. She ran to the door to welcome her friend, and found the crippled youth already hobbling up the steps on his "hydroplanes." He carried, tucked under his arm, a newspaper.

"What is it? What is new?" she gasped, seeing the paper.

"Something about your father, I am sure," said Jim, cheerfully. "Nothing bad at all. Something that, I think, ought to make you very proud."

"Oh! has he been found?" whispered Natalie, her face ablaze with eagerness.

"No, dear girl," said Jim, commiseratingly. "But there is no reason at all why he shouldn't be heard from soon. But here is the story of a survivor in the *Evening Courier* that tells us something about Mr. Raymond, I am sure."

Natalie seized the paper which had only just arrived from the city. The *Courier* was to be trusted. It gathered its news more carefully and in a less sensational way than any other of the afternoon city papers.

Of course, it gave a good part of its front page to the latest sea horror. That was to be expected. But its headlines were moderate, and were not smirched with pink ink.

"The following story was given to this newspaper by a survivor of the ill-fated *Sakonnet* who wished that his name might not be published.

"'When the first excitement arose, a little before noon, I was with my wife, who is an invalid, in our suite on the main deck. The *Sakonnet* had labored all night, for the storm had been a heavy one. At just what moment the propeller-shaft cracked and it was unsafe to longer force the engines, I do not know.

"'But at the hour of which I speak, the steamer began to yaw so, and the sea buffeted her hull so dreadfully, that my wife was greatly frightened. I ran out into the main saloon to learn what had happened, and found it full of other frightened people.

"'A purser barred the way to the open deck, and told us that the ship had become unmanageable, and the cause, but assured us that there was no immediate danger. He said they were getting canvas on her.

"'To the best of my belief, and from what I learned later, I think that the emergency sails had not been overhauled in many a voyage, and that the canvas and ropes were rotten.

"'However that may be, I know positively that in trying to get sail on the foremast the wind car-

ried mast, sail, and all away, and with it the wireless pole and aerials.

"'Before this time some of the seamen, or firemen, or the like, had broken away from the officers and launched a boat. This boat was overturned in sight of the steamer, and the men escaping in it were drowned. The boat was a lifeboat, presumably with air- and water-tight compartments; but there was something wrong with it, so that it sank. I believe that was what made Captain Joyce so careful—or so dilatory—in launching any more boats. I believe he distrusted them.

"'It is true that he waited for the *Naida* to send her own boats to our rescue when, after the *Malay* had been beaten to leeward, the larger steamer came to our aid.

"'Had Captain Joyce of the *Sakonnet* not distrusted his boats, or his crew, most if not all of the passengers on the crippled steamer could have been put aboard the *Naida* before she had to steam north at dark.

"'The boat crews of the *Naida* worked like heroes, for four hours and more, to rescue the hundred or more passengers she brought to New York. The life-raft launched from the crippled steamer brought only members of her crew to the rescuing ship, swelling the number saved to 113.

"'Of course, the word was passed that women

and children should go first. I saw no man among the passengers try to push himself in ahead of the weaker ones. My wife refused to go without me, and we remained where we were.

"'As the last boat was being filled from the rail of the *Sakonnet,* the purser—Mr. Harris—called Captain Joyce's attention to the case of my wife and myself. The captain—who I believe was the right man in the right place at every stage of the game—ordered us both lowered into the boat.

"'At that time there was no unaccompanied woman aboard the crippled steamer. Like my own wife several ladies refused to be separated from their husbands. We were merely the first couple to be given a chance.

"'As I approached the rail, while they fastened my wife into the sling-chair, a passenger pressed forward to my side and handed me his note-book, or wallet. I had become acquainted with him in Jamaica where he had been on business, and was glad to renew that acquaintance when the *Sakonnet* left Havana.

"'I had seen him calmly, graciously, and with splendid fortitude cheer the other passengers, help the ladies with the life-belts, and otherwise act as a brave gentleman should. He now spoke very calmly to me:

"'"You will reach New York before me, I am sure. Will you kindly deliver this to my firm, on lower Wall Street? If anything *should* happen to me, I would feel better knowing that my family would receive my personal papers."

"'"I will do so, Frank," I assured him, and we shook hands.

"'He then went back to the waiting passengers, continuing to help and encourage them, and was so engaged when I went over the side. I did not see him again."

This was not all of the story of the survivor; but it was as far as Natalie read. She needed no further explanation from Jim as to why he had brought the paper to her.

Her father's name was Frank, and his firm, Favor & Murch, had their offices on lower Wall Street.

CHAPTER V

"WOMEN MUST WORK"

"You see, Natalie," said the crippled boy, softly. "I was sure that means Mr. Raymond. Have you heard from Favor & Murch?"

"Not a word."

"Do you want me to telephone?"

"I—I don't know what to say about that—yet," responded Natalie, slowly. "But I'm just as grateful to you. Old Mr. Favor is not often in the office—and he is not a well man. And Mr. Murch isn't—isn't very friendly to father. Or, so I believe. I shall have to think about it."

"That's all right," said Jim, rising and preparing to depart. "You know I—we all—are ready and anxious to give you a hand when you need. Don't be afraid to send over if there is the least thing we can do."

He gripped her hand hard, and was gone, tap-tapping down the porch steps. Laura tiptoed in.

"Wasn't that Jim?" she asked.

"Yes," replied her elder sister, absently.

"The *dear!*" exclaimed Laura. "What did he bring?"

Natalie gave her the paper to read, and the younger girl read more than her sister had. She suddenly broke out with an exclamation.

"Oh, Nat! did you see this? The captain has reached Norfolk."

"The captain of the *Sakonnet?*" asked Natalie, quickly.

"Yes. He was taken off by the steam-trawler, *General Diggs*. He states that every soul—passengers and crew—left the sinking ship before he did, and the captain of the trawler verifies his statement. They saw the *Sakonnet* sink."

"Then father must be on one of those other steamers?" cried Natalie.

"Of course he is," declared Laura, quick to believe the very best. "Perhaps on the one that's gone to the Bermudas."

"The *Mohawk!*" exclaimed Natalie.

"Yes."

"But that's not likely," rejoined the elder sister, after a moment's thought.

"Why not?"

"Because father would not have taken the first chance to be saved after the *Naida* left the spot. There were some women left on the *Sakonnet* at that time, you know——"

"It was the *Pancoast*, the freight steamer, going to New Orleans, that rescued people imme-

diately after the *Naida* left," reminded Laura. "The *Mohawk* picked up the first officer's boat with fifteen passengers. And the first officer would not have left the *Sakonnet* much before the captain, would he?"

"I don't know," returned her sister, sighing.

"Well!" exclaimed Laura, cheerfully. "I believe that father has gone to the Bermudas, and we shall hear from him there, by cable."

In the morning papers was the report of the *Mohawk's* arrival at her destination. Among the fifteen passengers of the first officer's boat Mr. Raymond was not listed.

Now 128 passengers of the lost *Sakonnet* had been accounted for. All of the passengers had left the doomed steamer when the *General Diggs* had taken off Captain Joyce and the remainder of the crew.

According to the declaration of Captain Joyce the only persons drowned were those seamen and stokers who had launched the first boat. The two bodies already picked up were those of members of this mutinous party.

Interest was now centered in the *Pancoast,* the freight steamer bound for New Orleans, and in the outward-bound steamship which had come up just at dark.

The *Pancoast* had probably rescued under fifty

passengers. Therefore only 178 passengers could be accounted for as being taken aboard the *Naida,* the *Mohawk,* and the *Pancoast.*

The purser, Mr. Harris, had commanded a boat into which had been placed twenty-three passengers. Captain Joyce had counted these himself. Mr. Harris had not yet reported; but that boat was probably picked up by a Boston-bound craft that had been sighted and signalled the *Sakonnet* before nine o'clock on the fatal evening. This craft had signalled the code-number of her line with rockets, and Mr. Harris was then burning costons in his boat, quite near to the Boston-bound craft. She was a large freight steamer, and slow.

As for the remainder of the passengers, something like a hundred all told, Captain Joyce was sure that they had been picked up by the tramp steamer before mentioned.

By some error the name, or destination, of this craft had not been noted. She had come down upon the *Sakonnet* just at dusk, her name could not be read, and as soon as she had cleared the sea of all living survivors, she had steamed away.

She was a rusty iron steamship, standing well out of the sea, and her engines were powerful. She had three stacks, but in the darkness the stripes on those could not be discerned. Captain

Joyce did not remember noting any wireless mast upon the unknown steamer.

It was plain, the newspapers all agreed, that the commander of the *Sakonnet* was doing his best to defend his owners. The equipment of the lost steamship had been rotten, or the captain would not have delayed so long in putting out the boats.

It was believed that many of the lifeboats had to be recaulked and overhauled before Captain Joyce dared order them lowered into the tempestuous sea off Hatteras.

And there was much more of this that did not interest Natalie and her sisters in the least.

What they desired to know was what had become of their father.

Was he en route to New Orleans, or to Boston, or on the unknown steamship, bound for an unknown port?

Mrs. Raymond seemed sunk into a melancholy that nothing could dissipate. When Natalie was about, the poor woman was forever repeating that "there was no way out"; it had become a phrase shuttled back and forth in her troubled brain.

Dr. Protest shook his head. The poor lady was, indeed, in a perilous state. Physically and mentally she was in danger, and he did not hide this fact from the eldest daughter.

"But you are doing all that can be done for her. I shrink from putting the burden of a trained nurse upon your shoulders, child," said the good old physician.

"And it may not be necessary to have such assistance. At least, you are all doing very well now."

Lucille heard the phrase "trained nurse" and she became interested at once.

"If mamma has a trained nurse, will she do tricks like Bob Granger's trained dog?" she wanted to know, much to Laura's amusement.

The oldest of four took her domestic responsibilities gravely, as was natural. It is no small burden to have upon one's mind the supplying of food and other necessities for a family of five.

Natalie was forced to go marketing herself this forenoon. No matter what happens in a family—what domestic tragedy may take place—people must eat.

Natalie was learning the fallacy of the philosophy of the "Three Fishers": "Men must work but women must weep" is not according to the facts at all.

Women must work, too. Natalie was learning that truth, and this morning she learned the lesson in a very harsh manner indeed.

Mr. Fanner kept the grocery and provision

store where the Raymonds had traded for years. Mr. Fanner was a very nice man, and he belonged to the church the Raymonds attended, and he was a member of the same lodge as Mr. Raymond.

But Natalie was destined to learn that a social friendship cut little figure when it came to the arrangement of business matters.

The clerks all knew Natalie, and when she entered the store there wasn't one of them who would not have been glad to wait upon her in ordinary times. But it was Mr. Fanner himself who came forward to meet her.

"What can we do for you to-day, Miss Natalie?" he asked. "How is your mother—bearing up bravely, I hope?"

"She is quite prostrated, Mr. Fanner," said the girl, in a low voice.

"Dear, dear! I am sorry to hear it. Unable to take charge of domestic matters herself?"

"Quite unable—at present, sir," Natalie said. She felt as though there was more than neighborly curiosity behind the groceryman's words. "*I* must be head of the family for a time, I fear."

"Ah—yes? Rather a heavy responsibility for one so young," returned Mr. Fanner, eyeing her shrewdly. "But let us hope for the best. Surely, you believe your dear father will return?"

"We have every hope that he was saved. The captain declares that there were but eleven men lost in the wreck, and that all of those were of the crew."

"Ah—yes. It is too bad your father delayed his return from the south so long. And your mother— Come back here to the office, Miss Natalie. I want to speak to you," said the groceryman, suddenly.

She followed him with more than curiosity. Somehow she felt that she walked on the brink of trouble.

"Do sit down, Miss Natalie," he urged, briskly handing out a chair for her. He talked all the time—little, meaningless patter with which he sought to cover something deeper.

"Now, my dear girl, of course you are very young, and all this trouble has fallen upon you unexpectedly. Now—er, Miss Natalie, are you acquainted with your father's business affairs?"

She showed her surprise in her glance; and perhaps she sat a little straighter in the chair.

"I do not just understand your reason for asking that question, Mr. Fanner," she replied.

"Now—now! Don't be hasty," advised the groceryman. "You see, we all have to protect ourselves. First law of nature, you know, and all that."

He laughed nervously, and passed his handkerchief across his lips. He was much more disturbed than Natalie was—openly.

"Will you tell me just what you mean, sir?" she asked again.

"Why—er—Miss Natalie, there is a little bill——"

"You mean that my mother has been having an account here—as she always does when father is away?"

"Exactly! Exactly!"

"And you are afraid now that father—that father may not return and the bill will not be paid?"

"Oh, no! That is—perhaps it may be difficult for your mother to meet her expenses. And so, of course, she would not wish the bill to increase. It is now more than thirty-seven dollars. It is a larger amount——"

Natalie arose with dignity. It was very difficult indeed for her to speak without bursting into tears. But she would have died rather than allow Mr. Fanner to see how she was hurt!

"I shall go to New Yok myself to-morrow, Mr. Fanner, if—if we do not hear from father. His salary is awaiting mother's order with his firm. We will settle your account at once, sir."

"Oh, now! My dear Miss Natalie! Do not be offended. You understand——"

"Quite, Mr. Fanner," said the girl, it must be confessed in a too lofty manner. But she was grievously hurt. It was almost her first encounter with a really mean man. Some of her trust and confidence in humanity had gone from her in that moment—gone, never to return.

Mr. Fanner did not seek to stop her after that, but stood back, and she went out of the store without buying anything. She still had money in her purse, and there were other grocery stores in Burlingboro.

CHAPTER VI

FACING THE FUTURE

BUT something more than Natalie Raymond's pride was stung—something more than her belief in humanity scarred.

She was aroused to the appreciation of their financial situation as she had not seen it before. There was barely enough money in the hands of Favor & Murch to pay such pressing bills as this one of Fanner's.

What would they do when it was gone? If father did *not* come back how would they pay the next quarter's bills? How eat meanwhile?

And, even if he returned, as Natalie made herself believe, within a few days, would not these bills, and these difficulties face *him?*

Nor could Natalie, she knew, ever ignore domestic troubles again. She had had a taste of the grinding responsibilities of every-day life. She could not forget again.

All these sixteen years of her life her father and mother had been spending money for her, and she had never lifted her hand to earn a penny.

She had never thought of it before. What girl of her age and in her circumstances does?

"I can't go on any longer being a burden," decided Natalie, with set lips and bright, dry eyes, as she hurried home after making her purchases.

"Whether, or no, I must be self-supporting. *I am going to look for a position!*"

Natalie had to handle some of the home affairs with rather a strong hand at first. Laura's feelings, rebounding as such a volatile person's naturally will, from the abyss of sorrow into which she had first fallen, was now secure in her belief that her father would immediately be heard from; that he would return, and all would be as it was before. Even their mother, to Laura's mind, was vastly improved.

So the second Raymond girl came down dressed for a tramp in the woods with some chums, right after luncheon that day. Natalie had to put her foot down—and put it down sharply.

"You cannot go, Laura. You must stay with mother—and see that the others do not get into mischief. I have to go out."

"Why, you've been out all the morning, Nat!" cried Laura.

"And I may be gone a good part of the afternoon. You must learn to get on without me during the day, perhaps——"

"Now, that's not fair! I want a little time to myself, too," declared Laura, quite angrily.

"I am not going out for my own pleasure, I can assure you," returned the elder sister. "The responsibility of looking out for you all——"

"Now, harp on *that!*" said Laura, her face lowering. "I don't know what you mean."

"I see you don't," returned Natalie, patiently. "And I can't stop to explain it all to you now. But think about this for a while: We are poor; we have no positive income if father—father should not return——"

"You just stop that now!" exclaimed Laura. "You—you do it to—to make me cry. He *is* coming home!"

"Please God—yes!" cried Natalie. "But I must act as though it were not a probability. I have business to attend to that mother cannot do, being ill. Stay home and mind the children and be kind to mother, that's a good girl. I wouldn't ask you to, Laura, if it was not necessary."

Now, Laura was not ungenerous, or mean, at heart. And her ill-temper was past in a moment.

"All right, all right!" she said. "I'll be housekeeper. And I'll make tea-biscuits for supper. You'll see."

Laura's tea-biscuit were by a recipe that called for butter—and butter was forty cents a pound!

Natalie winced. So soon had the arrows of outrageous domestic fortune sought her most vulnerable spot—the family pocketbook. But she hadn't the heart to cross Laura again just then.

In her desk Natalie saw the closely written pages of something she had planned for the *Banner*. It was a little winter sketch, and although not seasonable, she felt she would have no more time just now to write another for that coming literary number. And Mr. Franklin would expect something, and it pleased Natalie to see her work in print.

So she took the sketch with her when she went out, and climbed the narrow stairs to the *Banner* office, on High Street.

"Just as welcome as the flowers in May, Miss Raymond!" declared Mr. Franklin, a kindly old gentleman whom she and her family had known for many years. He was pleased to call himself her "literary godfather," and although he could pay Natalie nothing for the stories she brought to the *Banner* office, he gave her much helpful advice.

"And what's the news? Has that vessel reached Boston?"

"I don't know," demurred Natalie. "But he might not be on that."

"He's bound to be on one of the three," said Mr. Franklin, with assurance. "Of course he is.

And we'll hope that he is not being borne off to the antipodes in that deep-sea steamer that seems to have carried away something like a hundred of the *Sakonnet's* passengers.

"Ah! 'tis a sad thing, however one looks at it. And you and your sisters and mother are not alone in their trouble. But have courage! The uncertainty will not be for long."

"Meanwhile, we are in difficulties," said Natalie, timidly. "We are not very rich, Mr. Franklin. I *do* wish I could earn some money."

"Bless us! Are you so soon desirous of turning all that school-lore you have absorbed into dollars and cents?"

"I do not know that what I have learned at school can be turned into dollars and cents. I wish now I had taken a commercial course."

"Oh, no! Oh, no! don't say that," protested the editor. "You have laid a very good foundation for a broader and more useful life than a commercial one. I feel sure of it."

"But I really am looking for work, Mr. Franklin. I am going to some of the shops this afternoon," announced Natalie, firmly.

Mr. Franklin looked at her through his steel-bowed spectacles, and slowly shook his head.

"I hate to think of you in a store." He rapped his knuckles on the folded paper she had brought

him. "There lies your path, Natalie Raymond. Business will not do for you."

"I am afraid it will have to do for me," she told him, as she went out.

Yet as she went down the stairs there suddenly passed through her mind the thought:

"The despised way may be our way out."

"Pshaw!" she exclaimed. "That old valedictory again. And from all the *Banner* would pay me for writing stories I'd become rich quick—yes?"

She knew a girl who had left school the year before to work in Kester & Baum's dry-goods store—Helena Comfort. Helena's father had died, and that seemed, at this time of trouble, to make a bond between Helena and herself, although Natalie had not seen much of her former schoolmate during the past year.

But Burlingboro was not so large a city that gossip did not travel in seven-leagued boots. Helena had heard that Mr. Raymond had been aboard the *Sakonnet.*

"But it can't be he's drowned, Nat," she cried, squeezing the other girl's hand. "He'll come back."

"Whether he does, or not, my schooling is finished. I went one year longer than you did, Helena; but I believe my folks needed my help

quite as much as your folks needed you. I am going to work now."

"But not in a store!"

"Is it so hard?" asked Natalie.

"No-o. *I* like it. But think of Natalie Raymond behind a counter!"

"I wish you wouldn't talk that way, Helena," replied Natalie, a little shaken. "Did *I* ever give myself airs? Am *I* too good to work in a shop? Or don't I know enough?"

"Goodness me, Nat! You're as smart as they make 'em. But it does seem funny—Oh, well; I bet old Mr. Kester would be glad to hire you. You look so bright and smart, you know."

"*That's* a compliment, anyway," returned Natalie, smiling.

"All right. You go back to the office and try him. Tell him who you are. Although he and his partner are Jewish people, they like to engage Gentile clerks—Mr. Kester says 'idt loogs goot for trade.' He's a funny old man—but kind-hearted after all. Only—remember that 'business is business'; look out for your own end of the bargain. Although the old gentleman is charitable he never mixes his philanthropy with business."

"I am not looking for charity," declared Natalie, looking mighty haughty again.

"Of course not. But a very little humility will help—when you want a job. Just the same, stick out for six dollars a week. Refuse to come for any less, and don't be afraid to start for the door if he seems unwilling to pay that. He'll come to terms before you get out of sight if he really wants you."

Thus advised and forewarned Natalie went back to the firm's office. For her own sake she was glad to find nobody there at the moment but old Mr. Kester himself.

Just as Helena had prophesied, Natalie had to bargain, and haggle, and listen to much talk from Mr. Kester before the old gentleman would advance his first bid of four dollars a week to six.

Indeed, she had to start for the door, and to her own fright reached it before the little old man came chasing out after her and led her back into his private office.

"Ach!" he gasped, mopping his bald head, which had become red enough to touch a match off on—or so it seemed. "Ach! *what* a har-rd-heardted madchen it iss—yes? Undt it loogs so modest andt kindt. Ach, these 'Merican madchens —they haf noddings to learn from de oldt Jew when it comes to a pargain—yes?"

And then he laughed, and agreed to take Natalie on at the notion and ribbon counter the very

next week at the wage she had demanded. So the girl went home after all with a strange, new, triumphant feeling.

She had taken the first step into that new world she had prated of on graduation day. But it was a step she had never looked forward to. She had never even dreamed of herself behind a counter at Kester & Baum's.

She determined to tell her mother nothing about it. Mrs. Raymond was in no mind to understand, or to discuss, any of these domestic troubles that faced Natalie.

She was stunned, or numbed by the shock she had received. But her father's appearance, Natalie almost believed, would make her mother instantly well.

But Laura had to be told, and Laura was a born aristocrat. What? Natalie Raymond demean herself—and smirch the family escutcheon, by becoming a mere shop-girl—working behind a counter in a cheap-john store?

"It's preposterous!" gasped the twelve-year-old. "You'll shame us all before our friends. Why! there won't be a decent person in Burlingboro speak to us."

"I am afraid we will have to stand any little ostracism that my act may bring," said Natalie, quietly, waiting for her younger sister to get over

her paroxysm. "We must all do what we can. You can look after the little folks and mother during the day time. I'll do all I can at night——"

"You never mean to do it, Nat!" cried Laura.

"I must. I see no other way. It is the thing nearest to my hand——"

That valedictory again! That thing was going to haunt her all the rest of her life, she believed.

"You're going to work in that horrid store just out of spite!" sobbed Laura.

"I'm going to work there for six dollars a week. Nothing very spiteful in that, I hope," returned the elder sister, grimly.

But, as usual, Laura quieted down after a time and was made to see the better side of the affair. She even promised, before the evening was over, with her arms about Natalie's neck, to do her share faithfully and keep every little trouble possible from mother.

They had long been used to petting their mother, and saving her steps and trouble, as their father did. So it was no new régime that was organized.

Even Lucille had learned to play quietly with her dolls in mother's room; and if the invalid wanted anything the baby could call Rose, or Laura.

The next morning Natalie hurried off to the city. She had frequently been to the offices of Favor & Murch, and she knew just how to get there in the most direct way.

Old Mr. Favor was himself in the place—in his private office. Natalie was very glad of that, for truth to tell, she did not like the junior partner very much.

But the old gentleman's eyes were red, and he was crying softly into his handkerchief, with a fresh edition of an afternoon paper spread upon the desk before him.

"Natalie! Natalie, child!" he gasped, when he saw her.

"What is it?" the girl demanded, her heart seeming to stand still, and the pallor growing in her face. "There is something new——"

"Haven't you seen this paper, child?" demanded Mr. Favor.

"No."

"Both of those other steamers—the *Pancoast* at New Orleans and the other at Boston—have reported the lists of the passengers and crew saved from the *Sakonnet*. In neither list is your father's name."

But Natalie would not lose hope like this. She pulled herself together and suddenly smiled—if a little faintly—at old Mr. Favor.

"Why!" she said, "then we know exactly where he is at last."

"How's that, child?" demanded the old gentleman.

"Father has gone with the hundred, or more, passengers upon the unknown freight steamship, that was outward bound. We'll hear from him as soon as the vessel touches port. But that may be clear across the ocean."

"Well, well! you have courage, child," said the old gentleman. "Poor Frank!"

"But you have heard from him here at the office?" suggested the young girl.

"Heard from him? Since the wreck?"

"Yes," replied Natalie, and she swiftly sketched the story in the paper of the anonymous survivor of the sunken steamer.

"Why, I know nothing about that, child," declared Mr. Favor. "I do not think it could be your father who was referred to. At least, I have heard nothing of it. I have not been down to the office myself for two days, and I have not seen Mr. Murch to-day. Surely, if your father's wallet had been brought in here by any fellow-passenger, I would have heard of it."

Somehow, this disappointment seemed the greatest blow Natalie had received since the first announcement of the wreck of the *Sakonnet*. She

had to sit down for a moment, and her voice was not steady when she preferred the request she had come to the city to make.

Her mother could not sign an order. She was too ill. But they were in need, and would Mr. Favor let her have the salary due her father to pay the bills that pressed them?

"Certainly! Certainly, Miss Natalie!" declared the old gentleman. "I'll get it from the cashier myself for you," and he bustled out of the private office.

He returned, thrusting the money into an envelope, which he sealed and saw that she put safely in her bag. It was not until she got home that Natalie learned that the good old gentleman had overpaid the sum due by fifty dollars.

But it was welcome—how welcome only Natalie, as she looked over her mother's little account book, and the sheaf of bills, knew! It smacked of charity, yet it was not the same; nor did Natalie have the courage to return Mr. Favor's bounty.

CHAPTER VII

THE DESPISED WAY

HOPE for Mr. Raymond's safety had now narrowed down to the unknown steamship reported as bearing passengers away from the spot where the *Sakonnet* sank.

Jim Hurley was an ever-present comforter these days. At least, if he was not present in person at the Raymond cottage some part of the day, he sent old Mose to assure Natalie that "Mastah Jim done watch de blue spark—an' he sends his regyards, Missee."

Other neighbors were very kind and considerate, too. Many tasty dishes were sent to the invalid as well as heartier and quite as palatable viands for the girls' own table. And Mrs. Hackett came in and did the week's wash just as she always had, and tried to refuse the dollar and a half due her.

"Now, Miss Nat'lie, sure it do be an imposition fer me to take a dollar an' a half fer such a little smitch of washin'. An' you an' Miss Laura doin' all of the ironin'. Sure, a dollar's more than enough.

"An' sure, if ye'd be writin' a letter now to me Pat, in the avenin' belike, w'en ye've nawthin else ter do, sure I'd be glad to pay ye for yer trouble.

"Me han's is so stiff an' lame, wot wid wan t'ing an' another, that me hand-writin' is quite sp'iled, so't is. I'd be ashamed ter have Patrick show me letter to his friends down there in N'Orlanes where he's wor-r-rkin'."

As it was a well-known fact to the Raymonds that Mrs. Hackett could not even sign her own name—save with a cross—this fiction of her hand-writing becoming so wretched was passed over lightly. But Natalie told her she would write for her to her absent son at any time.

There was something that troubled Natalie vastly, however, but which she discussed with nobody. For even Laura seemed to have forgotten it.

That was the story in the *Courier* of the survivor who had taken in charge the pocket-book of a certain "Frank" among the passengers of the wrecked steamer, and who was to deliver such property to the man's firm at their offices in lower Wall Street.

It seemed strange that there should have been two men among the passengers of the ill-fated *Sakonnet* who worked for firms in lower Wall

Street. Yet such must be the case—and both of them answered to the name of Frank!

"Or else," said Natalie, to herself, "that man did not go to the office as requested and deliver up the purse."

She determined to ask Mr. Franklin about this. He was a newspaper man and he would be able to tell her, perhaps, if there was any way of discovering the identity of the man who had told his story to the *Courier* reporter.

But the minute she appeared in the editor's office it was an entirely different topic Mr. Franklin drew her attention to. He handed her back the winter sketch she had left with him on her former visit.

"I haven't the heart to use it, Natalie," he declared. "I'd like to—I don't care anything about its unseasonableness. But it would make a corking good magazine story, and you can make it suit some editor, I am sure."

"A real magazine!" gasped Natalie, clasping her hands.

"You've been getting experience during this last year," said Mr. Franklin. "You are no longer an amateur. Many of these pieces you have been giving me lately I am sure you could find a market for among the home, or domestic, magazines.

"I want to see you get on, Natalie. Your talent lies this way. Begin sending your work to the magazines—I'll give you a list to try. If the stuff isn't accepted it will be time enough to hand it over to the *Banner*.

"You see, I am talking against my own interests. But I know your need, my child. At least, you take this 'Robbers of the Year' and write it over. Here, I'll show you where I believe it can be expanded, and where it had better be cut."

He went over it carefully with her, pointing out the changes she might make to strengthen the story. But Natalie, although she was delighted with this praise from Mr. Franklin, did not forget the errand that had brought her to the newspaper office.

"I can give you a letter to the news editor of the *Courier,* Natalie," he said, slowly. "But I would wait. Wait until we hear from the last batch of survivors. I am confident that your father is on that unknown steamship."

"And then it was *not* he of whom the man in the *Courier* spoke?"

"Oh! I could not say that. But your father will soon return, and he will know all about his wallet. Do you presume that he had much money in it?"

"Oh! I don't suppose he did," admitted Natalie.

"Then, if you can get along without going after the wallet, for a while, I would wait."

"All our bills are paid, thank goodness," declared the girl, proudly. "And I am going to work on Monday for Kester & Baum."

"My goodness me! don't let such work as that interfere with your trying to do something with your talent for writing!" cried Mr. Franklin.

Nevertheless, Natalie did not have so much confidence as the editor of the *Banner* in her ability to earn real money with her pen.

Nor did she tell him how very small a sum was left in the family purse after she had paid Mr. Fanner, and the other household accounts. The six dollars per week she could earn at the dry-goods store would go but a little way, too, in paying the expenses of the Raymond family. And yet she knew that she must pay as she went. If the father and husband did *not* return to them Natalie felt that she would have no right to incur debts.

She took hold of the new work on Monday with some enthusiasm, however. It was not hard for a bright girl like her, with a good memory and a desire to learn, to become familiar with the goods and prices.

She was naturally attractive to customers, being

so pretty and ladylike. And she quickly learned that a smile and a word or two of advice about the notions she handled often caused a customer to buy two articles where she had intended to purchase only one.

Before the end of the second day old Mr. Kester spoke to her.

"You haf de tr-r-radin' instinct, Mees Nat'lie. Ach! you are *born* for de wor-r-rk. You will get on famously here—yes?"

But it cannot be said that Natalie Raymond hoped to spend the rest of her life behind a counter. It seemed to her as though the education her parents had given her should bring her some better work than this.

At night, while she sat in her mother's room long after the children had gone to bed, she wrote several little pieces which she mailed to some of the magazines Mr. Franklin had named. And, with care, she rearranged and rewrote "The Robbers of the Year."

This was the longest story she had ever tried, yet at that it was only two thousand words. She sent it to *Our Twentieth Century Home.*

Yet she had no particular confidence in her success along this line. She loved to write; but it did not seem possible that anything that came so easy to her hand and brain, and which was a

NATALIE WAS NATURALLY ATTRACTIVE TO CUSTOMERS.

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pleasure rather than a labor, could bring her any great amount of money.

Natalie had "scribbled," as she called it, all her life—since ever she could read and write. But it had been mostly for her own and the family's amusement. Now she felt that she must turn every talent she possessed to account. If a dollar or two was to be made in this way, she wished to make it.

Laura could not get over the misfortune of the oldest of the four working in a store. And there was another who disapproved of this work which Natalie had been so glad to take up.

She found Jim Hurley in the cottage kitchen one evening when she came home from work.

"Goodness gracious me, Nat!" exclaimed the young fellow. "You mustn't do this."

"Do what, Jimmy-boy?" asked she, laughing at him.

"Why, become a common salesgirl behind a counter. I didn't know about it till mother came home to-day in tears—yes, indeed! She actually cried.

"She said it seemed so awful to see one of the Raymonds doing such a menial thing. It's just awful, Nat. Your father will sure be found——"

"Meanwhile, what am I to do, Jim?" she asked him, quietly. "We have practically no

money. I must earn some. The support of the family devolves upon me. Can you advise me how to get a better position than I have?"

"Why—Natalie——"

"Just so," said the girl, nodding her head. "There is no other way out, it seems. My education doesn't seem to have fitted me for doing any office or professional work. I can't typewrite and I do not know shorthand. Nor have I the time to learn the latter.

"Work is work—and as long as it is honest, what difference does it make?"

"But, Natalie!" he cried, in desperation. "You oughtn't to work at all. Your mother needs you at home. The children need you."

"Laura does very well. For this summer, at least, she must be housekeeper—under my direction. Even when dear father comes back—as I hope and pray he may before long!—I must keep at work. The family needs the money."

"I'll lend you money, Nat!" cried the young fellow, his face growing red. "I've got plenty—of my very own."

"Now, that's nice of you, Jimmy-boy," said she, patting his shoulder tenderly. "But I couldn't take it."

"Why not, I want to know?" he cried, almost fiercely.

"Why—why—Jim, there's no reason in the world why you should help the Raymonds to pay their way."

"Yes, there is," he declared, doggedly.

"What is it?" asked the girl, in wide-eyed wonder.

"You—you know how fond I am of you, Nat. I—I'm not like other fellows, I know. I never *can* be like 'em. But I've feelings, Natalie, and I—I've been fond of you ever since we were kids—since before I was hurt and had to go on these things," and he shook the ebony crutches angrily.

"Yes, Jimmy, I know what a good, true friend you are. But I—I couldn't take the money, I really couldn't." She held out her hand. "Good-bye!"

"But, Nat——"

"It's no use—I couldn't. Good-bye!"

She watched him go down the steps and sink into the chair which Mose had waiting, and his face, as he was wheeled away into the darkness, haunted Natalie Raymond for many a day.

CHAPTER VIII

HOPE FAILS

"I SEE no way out, daughter—no way out!"

This was Mrs. Raymond's continual cry. Despite the fact that Dr. Protest assured Natalie that the invalid was no worse than she had been—indeed, that she was advancing slowly toward a better state of mind and body, this reiterated belief on Mrs. Raymond's part became very hard for Natalie to endure.

And the girl, as the days wore on, found other things very hard to bear, too. Standing behind the counter at Kester & Baum's was not the easiest work in the world.

She found her back and limbs aching. It was all she could do sometimes to drag herself home at night to the little cottage. And there were always many household tasks for her to perform which could not be entrusted to Laura.

Besides, more than Laura and the Hurleys disapproved of Natalie working in the dry-goods store. Estelle Mayberry chanced to come into the place, saw Natalie at the notion counter, turned red, and fled.

"If I drive customers away like *that,* Mr. Kester will not be pleased," thought Natalie; but she could smile over it.

However, it was not so easy to bear when Bob Granger's aunt came sweeping into the store to complain about something that she had bought at the notion counter, and pounced upon Natalie as the person upon whom to pour out the vials of her wrath.

But the girl bore it without complaint. It was "all in the day's work." Why should she feel herself too proud for this position? Was it not bringing her money that would help the family to buy food?

There were many little kindnesses done to the Raymonds, however, that made grateful tears start to Natalie's eyes whenever she thought of them—graceful little acts by neighbors and friends which surely the Recording Angel noted.

And Mrs. Hackett insisted that Natalie write to her Pat. She declared the girls' wash was now so small—Mrs. Raymond being abed and all—that seventy-five cents was plenty for it.

Natalie wrote the letter as instructed, in her very best style, using her monogrammed paper, and sealing the envelope with her own seal. It pleased Mrs. Hackett immensely; but it would have pleased Natalie more had the woman not insisted

that the epistle be ended with the following couplet:

"My pen is poor, my ink is pale,
My love for you can never fail!

"Your own mother,

Her
"JENNY X HACKETT."
Mark

Natalie was writing almost every evening—long after the younger ones were abed. She could rest, she thought, in her chair from the work of the day; she did not know then that she was taxing both her brain and her body more than they should be.

But as she continued to write, her love for creative work increased. And the more she wrote the clearer her ideas became and the more they seemed to throng her brain.

And one day she came home to find a thin little letter waiting for her with the card of a certain publishing house printed in the upper left hand corner.

She tore it open, while the other three stood around in vast anxiety. An acknowledgment slip to sign, and a little pink check for four dollars lay in her hand.

"Goody! Goody!" cried Laura, hugging her

tight. "It's real money, Nat! Now you can leave that hateful store."

"What! On the chance of getting a four-dollar check?" cried Natalie, with a grim little smile.

But she *was* proud—and how thankful! That made her income for that week ten dollars. Why, they could almost live on that!

The newspapers had gradually given less and less space to the wreck of the *Sakonnet*. All but 104 passengers had been accounted for. Two or three of those rescued, and several of the crew, were still in hospital.

But nowhere—either in Boston, New York, the Bermudas, or New Orleans, was there any word of Mr. Raymond.

Three weeks passed—and more. Indeed, Natalie had worked three weeks in Kester & Baum's when the cable brought the news from Buenos Aires that the steamship *Eldorado*, from Baltimore, had recovered from boats and from the sea 103 passengers of the *Sakonnet*, wrecked off Cape Hatteras.

The list of passengers was given complete. It could not be doubted. The papers were again full of the affair, with cabled despatches to the anxious friends of these passengers, whose safety had so long been in doubt.

But there came no word from Mr. Raymond. He had not been among those saved.

The last hope had failed.

They dared not tell Mrs. Raymond. Indeed, Dr. Protest had warned the girls to say nothing to encourage their mother to believe that there was hope of their father's final return.

Laura quite broke down and went to bed. Fortunately the news was received on Saturday. Natalie could nurse her younger sister, and keep the other children out of Mrs. Raymond's sight over the Sabbath.

The oldest of the four could not think of herself. She had to support all the others in this trial.

The last hope had failed. She could not bear to think of it. Never again to see their jolly, companionable father. The thought, whenever it recurred to Natalie, was like the stab of a knife in her heart..

A settled melancholy fell upon the little cottage. Laura was up and about on Monday, but languid and heavy-eyed.

And Natalie had to go forth and face the world with the hopeless feeling bearing upon her mind that affairs could never be better than they were. She must drag out her existence behind Kester & Baum's counter; and what she earned

there was so little that it would be impossible for them to keep out of debt.

She saw the little accounts piling up—despite the utmost she could do, these would increase. A dollar here, another there, and she could never seem to pay one of the bills out of her salary.

Her mind returned oft and again to the story of the man who had talked with the *Courier* reporter. Couldn't it be possible that there was a mistake somewhere—that this man had meant her father, after all? Could he have taken her father's wallet to Favor & Murch without any account being made of it in that office? Or for some reason, had the survivor of the *Sakonnet* failed to do as his friend and fellow-passenger had asked him?

The Raymonds had heard nothing from their father's employers since Natalie had been to the city. Of course, there was no more salary coming to them. Indeed, Mr. Favor had been very generous in paying Natalie.

But the girl wrote to the firm a polite note asking if nothing had been heard of the man who had told his story in the *Courier,* pointing out the fact that she had hoped that the purse to be delivered was her own father's.

In return she received a brusk note from Mr. Murch himself. Nothing was known of the cir-

cumstances mentioned, and no property of Mr. Raymond had reached the office in any way.

She could understand that the junior partner would feel aggrieved because the contracts her father might have made for goods, while on his southern trip, had not reached the firm.

And if the firm did not receive those orders, and they remained unfilled, of course there would be no further money coming from Favor & Murch.

"There is no way out—no way out!" poor Mrs. Raymond repeated again and again.

But Natalie could not afford to reveal her own hopelessness before the invalid—or the other children.

"Of course there's a way out, Mother. I'm going to keep on writing, and working. I'll do something *big* yet—you see. Why! I've already got real money for writing—think of it!

"The way is opening before me—I see it. Don't you be alarmed, Mother-mine!"

But did she believe this herself? She did not dare stop to ask. It seemed the only thing to do, and she worked on, with the courage of a soldier fighting against desperate odds.

"'Next things' should be our motto. The despised way may be our way out."

CHAPTER IX

TROUBLE AT THE STORE

LAURA took Lucille to church one Sunday and the little girl came back and told Natalie, who questioned her, that the minister's sermon was all right at the beginning and at the end; but "there was too much middle to it."

And that was the opinion the oldest of four soon had regarding her work at Kester & Baum's. She went to the store each morning with revived interest—for that was Natalie's way.

She really tried to make the very best of everything. She kissed "Mummy-kins," and Laura, and "the kids," and went off those hot July mornings as cheerfully as though she were going to a picnic. And when she came home, after the long, breathless, sticky day—Rose said "the humility is so dense!"—she came with a step and spirit that both revived when she planted her foot in the Raymond yard.

But in between!

"Business is business" was the motto, as Helena Comfort had said, of Kester & Baum.

Well, Natalie could expect no better treatment than the other girls received.

In rotation the older clerks each had one week's vacation during the summer, with pay; but of course Natalie could not expect such a favor, when she had only worked so short a time.

She *did* ask the favor of half a day off, however, about the first of August. She felt as though she *must.*

She had received a two-dollar check from another magazine, but that was all. She had not heard from her short story, "The Robbers of the Year," since she had mailed it to *Our Twentieth Century Home*; but Mr. Franklin told her that that was no uncommon occurrence.

However, Natalie was being sorely pressed for money. All she had received from her father's firm had long since been expended, and the bills were beginning to accumulate with a rapidity that frightened her.

All hope that the mystery of her father's disappearance would ever be explained had almost died in the girl's heart. The papers had talked of the affair for a few days only.

Every other passenger aboard the *Sakonnet,* and all but eleven of her crew, had safely reached one port or another. It was strange that Mr. Raymond should have so completely disappeared.

One or two papers kept up some sort of an inquiry for a week, or more. Some few stewards, or seamen, were interviewed, and remembered that the missing man had been on deck with the other passengers. One even claimed to have seen him in his shirt-sleeves—cold as the night was—after the *Naida* had sheered off with the first lot of passengers saved with difficulty from the doomed ship.

It was intimated in one paper that Mr. Raymond might have been among those reckless and mutinous stokers and seamen who had launched the first boat, and been drowned.

This suggestion hurt Natalie cruelly. But Mr. Franklin told her to pay no attention to such a calumny. It would better die of itself.

Natalie had obtained a letter from Mr. Franklin to the news editor of the *Courier,* Mr. Staple. And obtaining Mr. Kester's permission to take an afternoon off, she spent regretfully the sum necessary to pay her fare to New York and reached the newspaper office on Park Row in the midst of the turmoil and riot of "putting the six o'clock edition to bed."

Mr. Staple was a little, gray, harassed man, with a green shade over his deep-set eyes, and a quick, jerky manner which was not conducive to Natalie's peace of mind when a grinning boy led

her to his desk after she had sent in Mr. Franklin's letter.

There were too many smiling young men around —some smoking, some rattling typewriters outrageously, some in their shirt-sleeves, some with their hats on. Natalie realized that she was a centre of interest.

Mr. Staple was very curt and polite. He said it was against his rule to give the information she required; yet the circumstances, as Mr. Franklin had explained them, warranted his doing so in this case.

He handed to Natalie a card on which he had written a name and address. And it was a name the girl had heard, and the address was in that old residential section—the lower part of Madison Avenue.

"This gentleman will not see you unless you have some very good way of introducing yourself, Miss. Are you alone?" asked Mr. Staple.

She told him she was.

"Here!" he exclaimed, in his gruff way, and wrote the word "Important" on his own card and thrust it into her hand. "Send your own card in with this—you have one?"

"Oh, yes, sir," replied Natalie, blushing.

"That is all I can do for you. Tell Mr. Middler your story. He is a stockholder in the *Courier*

and so he talked to me; but his name was not to be given out for publication. Whether your father is the man he referred to in his story of the wreck, I do not know."

The afternoon was waning and Natalie hurried up town, leaving the subway at Twenty-eighth Street. The house where she ventured to ring at the front entrance was so grim-looking that she was half afraid before a stately person in black opened the door, stared at her for a moment, and then unlatched the grill as well.

"Whom would you see, Ma'am?" he asked.

"Mr. Middler."

"You have an appointment with Mr. Middler, Ma'am?"

"No. But my business is pressing. I have these cards. Will you take them to him?"

"I will give them to his secretary, Ma'am. You will come in and wait, if you please."

In the reception room to which she was shown Natalie felt strangely lonely and afraid. The great house seemed so still. A clock ticked heavily on the stair and suddenly—like the clang of a prison door—tolled one, the quarter-hour.

A gentleman in black entered. He was a wispish sort of man, gray over his ears, and wearing eyeglasses. He fussed with the string of these glasses all the time he talked.

"You cannot see Mr. Middler. Mrs. Middler is very ill. You will have to talk with me, no matter what your business may be, young lady," said the secretary.

Natalie, knowing just what she wished to say, said it promptly and with no loss of time.

"I know about the wallet. Yes, I took it myself to the offices as Mr. Middler promised. I was not with him and Mrs. Middler on their trip to the West Indies. I know little about the wreck save what he told the reporter for publication. The shock of it brought on Mrs. Middler's present unfortunate condition."

"And will you tell me to whom you gave the wallet—and the name of the man who owned it?"

"Why, it was your father's wallet, Miss. At least, the name was Frank Raymond. Mr. Middler spoke well of him. And it was to the office of the firm he worked for that I took the wallet."

"Favor & Murch!" cried Natalie.

"Indeed, yes. That is the firm."

"But who received it there? I called on Mr. Favor——"

"I saw Mr. Murch. He receipted for the wallet."

"And there was money in father's wallet?"

"There was money—yes. I do not remember the amount. But I can find the receipt——"

"I will not trouble you for that unless it becomes necessary," said Natalie, hastily, and rising. "I will see Mr. Murch about it."

"It is an oversight on his part if he has not communicated with you," said the secretary, but evidently feeling no great interest in the girl's affairs.

He bowed her out. Natalie felt almost lightheaded when she was again in the street.

Why had Mr. Murch replied falsely to her letter? Or, if at that time he had not received the wallet, why had he not afterward acknowledged its receipt and communicated with Mr. Raymond's family?

Natalie wished very much that she had somebody at hand with whom she could consult in this emergency. She did not know what would be best to do next.

It was too late in the day then to seek the offices of Favor & Murch. They would be closed before she could get to Wall Street.

And she did not know where either Mr. Favor or Mr. Murch lived. Besides, she almost feared to present herself to Mr. Murch—alone.

She must do her business with old Mr. Favor. She determined to write to him first of all. If the

junior partner was deliberately trying to injure the Raymonds by withholding the wallet and money her father had sent to New York, Natalie was wise enough to see that she must go about the task of recovering them with caution.

She was too much disturbed by the discovery she had made to say anything to Laura, or the others, about her trip to town. And the very next day something happened at the store which quite put out of her mind—for the time being—the mystery of her father's wallet.

Mrs. Granger was a very good customer of Kester & Baum; but she was a rather bad-tempered woman, and the clerks all dreaded to see her come into the place. Natalie was not the only girl who had been "blown up" for some real or fancied fault.

That was one of the hardest—and the only degrading phase—of this shop life, to Natalie Raymond. The selling of goods behind a counter is just as pleasant work as any other; but selling to ill-bred and mean-spirited people is where the work galls.

Natalie, by this time, had taken practical charge of the notion end of the long counter, an older clerk being advanced to the charge of the ribbons. The former was clearing out boxes and re-arranging the shelves one morning, piling the rubbish

upon the end of the counter in readiness for Mark, the porter, to take it away.

Therefore, having her back to the door, Natalie did not see or hear Mrs. Granger when she came into the store. And by chance the lady came straight to the notion counter.

She stood there a moment unobserved by either Natalie or the girl at the ribbons. Natalie suddenly heard a sharp rapping on the counter and turned to see Mrs. Granger, her face very red, rapping smartly with her gold-mesh bag.

"Can I get any attention in this store; or can I not?" she demanded, angrily. "Am I to stand here all day waiting on your pleasure, Miss?"

Now, Mrs. Granger knew Natalie Raymond quite as well as she did any other of her son's schoolmates. Natalie had been frequently at the Grangers' house—one by no means as handsome as the Hurleys'.

Indeed, before the misfortune that had fallen upon the Raymonds, and the girl had been obliged to come to Kester & Baum's as a "common clerk," Mrs. Granger had been very gracious to Natalie. For, like most of the other boys at the high school, Bob Granger admired Natalie Raymond, and his mother had seemed to approve of her.

The lady's attitude was now, however, neither admiring nor gentle. She asked her question in the most overbearing way possible. But Natalie merely replied:

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Granger. What can I show you?"

The lady told her in a snappish way, paid for her purchases, and went off to some other counter.

"Dat dame's a loo-loo bird, ain't she?" growled Mark, the porter, who had observed it all. "I'd give her as good as she sent, *I* would.'

"And lose a good customer—and my own job?" asked Natalie, with a laugh, and went back to her re-arrangement of the shelves, while the porter swept the accumulated rubbish into his cart and wheeled it on to the next counter.

Suddenly Natalie was disturbed again—and this time in good earnest. She heard Mrs. Granger shouting half-way across the store. Old Mr. Kester came on a dog-trot from his office, too.

"My bag! I know I left it on that girl's counter!" exclaimed the excited woman, and in a moment both Mrs. Granger and Mr. Kester were before Natalie, glaring at her.

"What—what is it?" gasped the girl, really frightened.

"My bag!" exclaimed Mrs. Granger.

"De lady's bag, Miss Nat'lie," repeated Mr. Kester. "Surely you haf seen it—yes?"

"I saw it when Mrs. Granger paid me," said Natalie, slowly. "I have not seen it since."

The woman's red face and blazing eyes were no pleasant spectacle. Natalie's heart leaped in her bosom; she saw that Mrs. Granger did not believe her.

CHAPTER X

UNDER A CLOUD

"You see," the woman said, turning to Mr. Kester, "she remembers the bag well enough."

"I think," said Natalie, trying to quell her nervousness, "that every clerk in the store knows that bag, Madam."

"Impudence!" ejaculated Mrs. Granger, flashing back at the girl. "What have you done with it?"

"Mrs. Gr-r-ranger! I peg!" gasped the old Hebrew, clasping his hands. "Don'dt say sugch t'ings for vitch you will pe sorry——"

"Do you mean to stand up for this impudent girl?" demanded Mrs. Granger, whirling on him again. "There was more than two hundred dollars in that bag."

Then Mr. Kester did a very brave and fine thing. He stepped quickly around the end of the counter, seized Natalie's hand, and bowed with old-fashioned courtesy to the irate customer.

"Madam," he said, slowly, and in a low voice, "I vould tr-r-rust Mees Nat'lie mit mein all—mit

mein all! If she say she has not de pag seen, den she has *not* de pag seen."

"You are insufferable, Mr. Kester!" exclaimed the customer, her eyes blazing. "I shall go immediately to my husband, and I know that he will bring the police into your shop."

Mr. Granger was one of the city commissioners of police—a very important man politically. But the old store-keeper was not to be shaken.

"De bolice may tur-r-rn mein shop oudt—idt iss de same. Mees Nat'lie couldt nodt pe tempted py any sum of money——"

"And those Raymonds owing everybody, and nobody but this girl to support them?" cried Mrs. Granger, with a scornful laugh. "Why! the case is plain—plain! Search the girl, Mr. Kester, and you will likely find my bag."

"No, Madam. I will not have her searched—no!" exclaimed the old gentleman, firmly.

But Natalie had clutched her courage now with both hands.

"Let me be searched, Mr. Kester," she gasped. "It is nothing—I do not mind. And it will save you trouble——"

"Mrs. Granger can make me no tr-r-rouble," he said, grandly. "I will search mein store for her—from cellar to rooftree—yes! But mein clerks I vill nodt search."

"This is too much!" cried the exasperated woman. "I shall go to my husband immediately," and she swept out of the store.

But it must have been that Mr. Granger was of a more equable temper than his wife. No policeman came to the store, and Natalie wiped her eyes and went about her work as usual.

Old Mr. Kester gave her a confidential nod every time he passed the counter, and the other girls declared "it was a mean shame" and said uncomplimentary things about Mrs. Granger.

The fact remained, however, that the girl was under a cloud, and she felt so badly about it that she could not eat the bit of luncheon she had brought with her, but spent most of her luncheon half-hour on her knees behind the notion counter searching every cranny for the lost bag.

"She never left it here at all," declared Sadie Polk. "She dropped it in some other part of the store. That's what *she* did."

"But everybody's looking for it," replied Natalie, sighing. "It doesn't seem as though it could disappear so utterly—unless some person really was tempted and—and took it."

"And that could easily be, too," declared Sadie, who was at the ribbons, and Natalie's nearest neighbor. "Some customer might have taken it. Don't you worry, Nat."

"But I cannot help worrying. Mr. Kester is just as good as he can be; but the Grangers will make trouble for him—they are that kind."

The day passed very unhappily for Natalie, and she went home at night feeling that everybody she met who knew her must have heard of the loss of Mrs. Granger's bag, and be doubtful whether she was an honest girl or not.

More than Mrs. Granger, she knew, would think as Mrs. Granger did. It was true that she could not keep the family bills paid up and that what she earned was not sufficient to support the family in comfort. The idea that she had been tempted by the wealthy woman's bag, and its contents, might not seem so preposterous to other folk.

And she had to turn into her own yard briskly, and speak cheerfully to the children, and kiss them all round, and run up to mother's room with a light step, and appear to be as light-hearted and tranquil as ever— Ah! this was the hard part of living which Natalie had to endure.

For, in the depths of her heart, the thought of her father and the mystery of his absence took precedence over every other thing. Her mother's illness had become an ordinary affair even before the loss of the *Sakonnet,* and her father had always borne his share of that burden.

But now it was for Natalie alone to bear every-

thing. Laura was too light-hearted and thoughtless to shoulder much. She did what she was told—and usually without complaint; but it was the oldest of the four who must plan, and scheme, and turn over and over in her mind every problem that came up.

Natalie had written letters to the captain of the lost steamship, to the first mate, to the purser and to the owners.

All these letters breathed the same desire—that the men might remember something regarding the missing man. She repeated Mr. Middler's story of what Mr. Raymond was doing aboard the sinking ship when he and his wife were put into the *Naida's* boat. She hoped that some one of the *Sakonnet's* crew might remember some incident that would help to trace her father.

But one after the other she received answers to these letters; and nobody could remember a thing, save that Mr. Raymond was upon the ill-fated boat. Neither the first officer, nor the purser, remembered him in their boats.

In the darkness and storm, however, when the *Eldorado* had picked up so many of the sinking ship's passengers, from boats and rafts, he might easily have been knocked overboard, and the accident be unnoticed in the general confusion.

Indeed, this was the final decision of all who had

had a part in the unfortunate wreck. Their letters brought anything but hope to Natalie's mind.

And yet she could not believe that her father was gone forever!

She said nothing encouraging to Laura and the others about their father's return; yet in her secret soul Natalie did not believe that he was drowned.

"The milkman asked for his money this noon when he came around, Nat," said Laura, more quietly than usual, when the little girls had gone to bed. "He—he looked so queer when I said that we didn't have it, that I am afraid he won't bring the milk to-morrow."

"Did you tell him *I* was settling the accounts now—and that I was working?" asked Natalie, hastily, and with much more confidence than she really felt.

"Oh, yes; but it did not seem to—to convince him," Laura replied, slowly.

"Not convince him! Well—and that's no wonder," said the oldest of four, sadly. "I guess he knows just about how far my wages at Kester & Baum's will go toward paying all our bills."

"But Lucille—and Mummy-kins—must have their milk," said Laura.

"Yes. But you and Rose and I must be content to use the canned milk—and very little of that—in our tea and coffee. Tell him one quart a

day hereafter, and I will pay him out of this week's wages."

The milk bill was four dollars. Natalie knew very well that she could not afford to pay out two-thirds of her week's wage to one tradesman. It would never do.

Before starting for the store the next morning, Natalie hovered over the little jewel box that her father had given her on her twelfth birthday. From time to time, he or her mother had made her little presents of trinkets so dear to a girl's heart.

They were not expensive jewels; but such as they were, they were *good.* For instance, the pretty fleur-de-lis pin which had come to her the very last Christmas was set with real diamond chips. Her father had paid at least twenty dollars for it, and she never wore it save on great occasions.

Now she whipped it out of the box, after a little hesitation, and hid it, cotton-wool and all, in her pocket. She carried it to the store with her, and all the forenoon the remembrance of it, and what she felt she must do with it, shared with the trouble over Mrs. Granger's lost bag the thoughts that shuttled back and forth in her mind.

Neither Mr. Kester nor Mr. Baum said a word to her regarding Mrs. Granger's loss; but of course the clerks were still full of the matter,

and Natalie had to listen to a great deal that she would have just as lief missed.

Not that one of her fellow-clerks intimated that she had been guilty. They all blamed the customer. If the bag had been stolen, it was done by somebody who had also been buying in the store.

And with all this was the thought of the little pin her father had given to her and what she must do with it. To maintain the family's independence, keep up a certain appearance before their old neighbors and friends, and to pay a just debt, the young girl spurred herself to do something which —for a person of her bringing up and home associations—seemed more galling to her pride than anything which had thus far confronted her.

When it came her time to go for lunch she did not open the packet she had brought from home as usual; but she put on her hat, removed her black apron and sleeves, and hurried out of the store.

She had no idea, however, as she hastened into another—and meaner—part of the town that a young man who had lingered about the store-front for an hour or more followed in her footsteps, never falling more than half a block behind.

CHAPTER XI

AT THE PAWNBROKER'S

NATALIE knew just what she had to do, and she knew how to do it. For the idea was no sudden thought. All these weeks she had merely been staving off the time when she would have to stoop to do that which seems one of the sharpest stabs of poverty.

To the poor who cannot beg, but who may have trinkets or valuables upon which money may be raised, the goal of the pawnshop is just as sure as the grave itself.

She had sent out manuscripts until she dared spend no more money for stamps and envelopes. And all that had thus far come to her from these attempts were the two poor little checks.

She had nothing she might sell and thus raise money for their needs. She could not, of course, without her mother's signature increase the mortgage on their humble home; and Mrs. Raymond could not have her mind disturbed by such matters.

So the pledging of her own little trinkets seemed the only way. And that milkman must be satisfied!

The hard thing which had been in her mind for

weeks must now be done. She had even passed a particular pawnshop after dusk, and noted its private entrance, and the fact that this latter was around upon a side street, not much frequented.

Besides, the shop was in a part of the town where she was not at all acquainted. So the girl hurried there now, hoping that she would meet no friend or acquaintance, and suffering in pride already because of what she contemplated doing.

Natalie turned the corner of the street swiftly and came to the broker's side door. It opened at a touch, and she whisked in, breathing a little sigh of relief that the street had been so empty.

She had no idea that, as the door behind her closed, a young man—in a straw hat with a gay band upon it, a natty summer suit, but with square-toed, heavy boots and owning a very steady pair of gray eyes—came around the corner quickly.

He halted, amazed without doubt that the girl had so quickly disappeared. He favored the entire block, up and down, and on both sides, with a glance that little escaped. He even looked up at the windows on both sides of the street. They were all tenement houses of the poorer class.

Suddenly he espied the three golden balls over the narrow door of the pawnbroker's shop. The sight spurred his thought. He nodded, hesitated, backed around the corner, and went to the front

door, after lingering a little at one of the two show windows.

Meanwhile Natalie found herself standing in a half-lighted, narrow passage, one side of which was a board partition. There were little half-partitions dividing the passage into stalls, and in each stall a window opening into the pawnshop.

Having screwed her courage to the sticking point the girl wasted little time; yet she stepped up to the nearest window timidly.

A young man—little more than a boy in appearance—came to the window and asked—perfunctorily at first:

"What is it?"

He held out his hand, well used to the ways of the customers who sought the shop. When he saw, in the half-darkness, a pretty young girl, he became more interested.

"What is it you wish, Miss?" he repeated, in a more cordial tone.

Natalie placed the little pin in his hand. For the moment she could not find her voice.

But she did not need to. He knew of but one reason for anybody bringing a trinket to that window. He stepped back, viewing the pin more closely under the rays of the electric lamp above his head.

"How much would you wish on this, Miss?"

he asked, finally. Natalie's pulse had been beating like a triphammer.

Now, the girl had not forced herself to come here without knowing well just what she hoped. She knew that she must get all that the broker would lend, for there were other bills pressing as hard—almost—as the milkman's.

And—naturally—she had an exalted idea of the pin's worth. To her, it seemed as though no sum she might name would be too great for the beautiful pin that represented her father's love and thoughtfulness.

But she knew, too, that there must be a set value for such a trinket, and likewise that the broker would only lend a fraction of that value. He must protect himself.

"How much?" repeated the young man.

"Twelve dollars," breathed Natalie, softly.

"Oh, no, Miss! that is more than the thing is worth at retail. And we have to sell our unredeemed pledges through the auction rooms. We could not give you half that, even."

"Not six dollars!" gasped the girl, confused and trembling.

The young man spoke to another who was near. An older clerk appeared, and Natalie's clerk held out the pin silently. The other looked at it keenly and said—to the girl's surprise:

"P. N."

"You ask altogether too much," said the younger man. "We could not touch it," and he laid the pin before her on the shelf.

"You could not possibly let me have—have *ten?*" murmured the girl.

The older clerk said:

"G. R."

"B. R.?" returned the first one, questioningly.

"G. R." corrected the other, emphatically.

Natalie saw that the brokers had an enigmatic language by which they could discuss both the object offered as a pledge, and the person offering it. The older clerk was advising the younger.

"You see," said the latter, gently tapping the little pin, "those are only chip diamonds—and they do not sell well. Besides, the pin is old-fashioned."

"But—but, I will take it out again," cried Natalie, under her breath.

"That's what they all say," replied the young man, grinning. "Will you take three dollars on it? That is really all we ought to offer."

"Three dollars!" gasped Natalie, and almost burst out crying.

"S. O." spoke the other clerk, from the rear.

"What do you really *need,* Miss?"

Natalie swallowed hard—something beside her

pride. What should she do if she could not even get the four dollars due the milkman on this—her very best piece of jewelry?

"I've *got* to have four dollars," she declared, desperately.

The clerk shook his head slowly. He was a good actor, that young man!

"Well," he said, "we really ought not to do it. We'll lose money by it, Miss, if you don't take the pledge out again. What's your name and address, Miss? Ikey! four dollars on the D. pin."

Natalie had even thought of the fact that she must have *some* name and address written on the ticket. To tell the truth, she had asked Sadie Polk and Helena Comfort about these loan shops, and both of these girls, through much longer buffeting the world than herself, *knew*.

She could not let the honored name of "Raymond" appear upon the ticket for the pin, nor the address of the little cottage on Vesey Street. She said, glibly enough:

"J. Harris, 24 Cullen Street."

The young man smiled, though he nodded, and repeated it to "Ikey" at the desk inside. He knew very well that this pretty and neatly dressed young lady did not live on Cullen Street.

But in half a minute the four dollars and the

pawn-ticket were thrust into her hand and she could go. And she slipped out of the door very quickly, hurrying back to the store.

But she was not followed now. The young man with the gray eyes was in the main store of the pawnbroker's. Before the younger clerk could wrap up Natalie's pin, he reached across the counter and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Hul-*lo!*" said the clerk, questioningly, drawing back.

"What was it she pawned, Izzy?" queried the gray-eyed man.

"And what's that to *you?*" returned the other.

The man outside the counter opened the left side of his coat so far that the clerk could see the gilded shield pinned on the man's suspender near the armhole of his waistcoat.

"What!" ejaculated Izzy, in plain wonder. "Not that young lady?"

"Let's see it," ordered the detective. "Is *that* all?"

"Yep."

"And she ain't been here before?"

"I betcher she ain't never been to *no* shop before," returned the worldly-wise Izzy.

"Think not, eh?"

"You're barking up the wrong tree. What are you looking for?"

"That gold-mesh the commissioner's wife says she lost."

"And you're trying to put it up to that young lady? Forget it," said the young broker, with disgust.

"That's all right. She may come again. Just keep it in your mind—all you fellers—that the gold-mesh has got to be found. If it isn't there'll be a shake-up around headquarters that will set everybody on the force to barking."

The young man set his straw hat a little more firmly on his close-cropped head, and squeaked out of the store in his square-toed shoes, into the hot August sunshine.

CHAPTER XII

WHEN NATALIE AWOKE IN THE NIGHT

So Natalie satisfied the milkman and Laura was not wise enough to wonder where the extra four dollars came from. The thought of her trip to the pawnshop—and that it was only the forerunner of similar trips—hurt Natalie cruelly.

But what could she do? They had no relatives. Both Mr. and Mrs. Raymond had been only children, and their parents were dead. The four girls were singularly alone in the world.

For to friends and acquaintances Natalie could not open her heart about their straitened financial circumstances; and although Mrs. Granger had blurted out what she believed to be the truth regarding their poverty, few there were who even suspected that the Raymonds were really in need.

Perhaps good Mrs. Hackett knew. And in her way she did all that anyone could do to help Natalie.

The girl was proud. She could not have borne charity, offered as it would be offered. And she knew that the very first thing that would be said, if the fact of their need became known, was that

she could not support her mother and younger sisters, and that the family had better be divided.

Divided! Send Lucille—and perhaps Rose—to some institution? Make Laura—at her age—attend school only half-time when fall came, and go into a shop for the other half of the day?

No! That was not to be thought of. Natalie started out of her sleep in the night, sometimes, ridden by the nightmare of that horror.

She had written a letter to Mr. Favor, the senior partner of the firm her father had worked for, but had received no answer. Now she wrote again, repeating what Mr. Middler's secretary had told her.

She would have gone to New York and tried to see the old gentleman—who, at least, had seemed kindly disposed toward her—but she shrank from spending the money for the fare, or losing the time from her work at the store.

She saw little of the editor of the *Banner* these days, and there was nobody to encourage her in her writing. She dared use no more money for stamps and, one after another, her little squibs were returned from the domestic magazines, and no more were purchased.

Only from *Our Twentieth Century Home* she did not hear, and it was to the editor of that popu-

lar magazine she had sent "The Robbers of the Year" and some juvenile sketches.

Had she been mistaken after all in her belief that by her pen she might find "a way out" of the jungle of financial trouble they had gotten into?

During the long evenings, while she sat in her mother's room after the other girls had retired, Natalie wove many pretty fancies at her desk. She wrote much that she dared not send forth, because the chance of the articles being accepted seemed so hopeless.

And then, such experience as she had showed her that the brief little pieces of fiction she wove would bring, at the best, but small amounts. And she needed a big, big sum.

Somehow she must obtain a large sum of money to pay the increasing bills and set the family on its feet. This thought bred in her brain an idea that finally she began to put upon paper.

And perhaps, since the world began and people have created brain images, the same need has inspired the best in art, in music, and in literature—the need of money.

Great geniuses have worked because starvation whipped them to it. The fact that necessity is the mother of invention applies to every creative art.

And because Natalie Raymond could not see how she was to pay the family's bills on six dollars a week she was inspired to begin a piece of imaginative writing which, she hoped, might bring what to her seemed a large sum of money.

She would write a book! If a publisher would print it, he might pay her enough to make their way easier for a time, at least.

And as the thought was born in her mind, another was born with it. She would not make the mistake of the usual young writer, and try to write about something of which she knew nothing. Mr. Franklin had often warned her against that cardinal literary sin.

What could she better do than put into her story experiences which were common to herself and her friends—write of struggles and triumphs which were not outside the pale of her own understanding?

And so she began the long story, and the title of it was: "Her Way Out."

She wrote slowly, for this was very different from anything she had ever tried before. Sustained fiction, save by those who have learned the technique of it, is no easy task. The 'prentice hand usually fails.

But Natalie had more than a mere talent for writing. Of course, this power which had been

born in the girl was undeveloped as yet; but it was growing day by day.

Rather, night by night. For it was at night, after all the house was still, and the summer air had cooled, that she sat at her desk-table and wrote and wrote until arm and hand were both a-wearied; but the inventive part of her brain seemed never to weary at all.

Mr. Franklin's encouraging words had awakened in the girl a desire to put upon paper the thoughts that crowded her mind. Sometimes they were expressed crudely; but almost always she discovered this to be a fact upon re-reading them, and she was not afraid to tear up the fairly written sheets and begin again.

The financial aid her writing had brought her had been small enough. Surely it was not the two little checks from publishers that encouraged her to go on.

It was something within her that cried out for expression.

Her daily tasks at the dry-goods store satisfied none of the longings of Natalie's soul. And the sordid problems of their domestic life were endured only because it was her duty to her mother and the younger girls to grapple with these things bravely.

No, her outward life could not satisfy the

highly imaginative girl. She had soon begun to live *two* lives—one, the gentle, patient, hard-working existence which touched at all points the lives of those whom she loved so well; the other was a secret life—a dream life, indeed—in which her associates were the children of her own fancy—the incidents born of her own brain.

And so, on coming home from the store, and going through the round of her evening tasks cheerfully, Natalie, when the house was still, would creep upstairs and sit down to her desk with a sigh of real happiness, and forget all the sordid things, and the little and great troubles, while putting upon the paper the thoughts which seemed thronging to the very tip of her pen—waiting, eager to be released.

She thought no more of the accumulating bills then; nor of the price of foodstuffs; that Rose had stubbed through the toes of her best shoes, and that soon, soon she must go to that horrid pawnshop again. She forgot the pain and weariness of the work at the store—even lost for the time being the remembrance of Mrs. Granger's mesh-bag and the cloud that hung over her all the time because of its disappearance.

So, when she finally went to bed, it surely was not the cares of the day that were last on her mind. Then why did she suddenly, in the middle of one

hot night late in August, awake with a sudden shock and with a certain thought about the lost gold bag recurring again and again in her brain?

And it was such an insistent thought, and so important, that the girl could sleep no more that night. She was up earlier than usual, anxious to get to the store.

It was useless to go before a certain hour, she knew. Even Mark, the porter, would not be there until seven o'clock. And she must have Mr. Kester, or Mr. Baum on hand, too, if, as she hoped, the thought that had come to her in the middle of the night was both a wise and feasible one.

CHAPTER XIII

LUCK IN TWO PIECES

MARK, the porter, sweeping the long aisle to the front door of Kester & Baum's store, certainly was astonished to see Natalie Raymond's flower-like face pressed close against one of the glass panes.

He dropped his long-handled brush and unlocked the door, but opened it only a little way.

"Pretty near an hour before youse girls can come in, Miss," he said.

"But I've got a special reason for coming, Mark," she said, eagerly.

"Well, now! did de boss say youse could come in at dis hour?" demanded the porter, doubtfully.

"No, Mark."

"Then how am I goin' to let you in—will you tell me *that?*" he demanded.

"Oh, Mark it's something dreadfully important," said the girl, anxiously. "Let me in so I can telephone to Mr. Kester. I want him down here, too."

"Ye want the boss down here—and at this hour? It's crazy ye be."

"Only a little crazy," Natalie assured him, smiling. "Do let me in, Mark."

He did so, finally, under protest. But Natalie hurried directly to the telephone in the office. Mark stood by while she rang up old Mr. Kester.

"What do you want papa for?" a woman's voice demanded. "He hasn't his breakfast eaten, yet."

"Please tell him it is very important," said Natalie, earnestly. "Nothing has happened here to disturb him, yet he is needed very much."

Then she turned to the curious Mark.

"Did I hear you tell Mr. Kester the men would be here to-day to cart away the rubbish and papers?"

"Sure you did. They've begun now," said the porter, in surprise.

"Oh! they've not begun yet?"

"They've got a cart backed into the yard now," said Mark. "Them bins is chock-a-block. It'll take 'em all day to clean 'em out."

Natalie started on a run for the back of the store. The door was open to the back platform. This overlooked the area in which two huge slat bins were built, into which Mark shot all the rubbish he swept up in the store. Everything—ashes and all—went into those bins, saving the wooden

boxes. Three or four times a year a junk contractor came and removed the accumulated rubbish. Natalie knew that the bins had not been cleaned since she had come to work at the store.

"Don't load anything more into your wagon!" the girl called down to the workmen. "Mr. Kester will be here soon and he wants to see you."

She took a liberty in saying this; but she was very anxious now and it seemed as though she scarcely could wait until the senior partner of the dry-goods firm arrived.

Mr. Kester came puffing in by a quarter to eight, before any other clerk except Natalie had come.

"Vass iss?" demanded the old gentleman. "I expected the store was purned down, yet."

"It's the rubbish—they're going to clear out the bins to-day, Mr. Kester," cried Natalie, eagerly.

"Vell? Vell?" he returned, excitedly.

"It struck me in the night. It woke me up out of a sound sleep. The morning Mrs. Granger lost that horrid purse——"

"De goldt mesh pag?" exclaimed Mr. Kester. "Goldt iss nodt horrid, Nat'lie."

But Natalie ignored his comment and hurried on.

"Mark was taking rubbish from my counter.

After she had bought of me, he swept a lot of stuff into his cart. If she had carelessly left her bag there, and it had been covered up——"

The old gentleman caught at the idea instantly, and rumbled forth an exclamation in German.

"Isn't it worth trying?" cried Natalie. "I will stand there and watch the men sorting the rubbish all day. Perhaps we ought to have somebody else look, too——"

"I will talk to Mr. Granger," declared Mr. Kester. "You take Mark, Nat'lie, and bot' of you watch. Idt iss a goot chance—yes."

Indeed, the idea that the bag had been swept into the rubbish and then dumped into the bins seemed a good one to them all. The gate of this area-way was kept locked, and nobody overhauled the rubbish bins until the contractor came.

In an hour the young man with the gay band on his straw hat appeared from the police commissioner's office. Mr. Kester scarcely left the rubbish bins, either, he was so excited.

The men loading the wagons used long hooks, and they drew the rubbish down to one level, and shook it out. Nothing was forked into the wagons that was not first examined thoroughly.

It was after luncheon time when Mr. Granger

appeared himself. He spoke rather disparagingly of the project, but even while he was arguing with Mr. Kester, Natalie's tired eyes caught the dull glint of metal.

"The bag! The bag!" she shrieked, pointing at the chain which appeared from under an avalanche of rubbish.

The detective grabbed for it, and held the bag up, discolored, but whole. Natalie burst into tears and dropped in a weak little heap upon an old box near which she had been standing.

As Mr. Granger sprang forward, the detective snapped open the bag, put in his hand, and drew forth a roll of banknotes.

"Safe as a house, boss," he said to the commissioner. "The money is all there."

Mr. Granger took the purse and the money and began to count the latter eagerly. The younger man turned and dropped a light hand upon Natalie's shoulder.

"Forget it—forget it, Miss!" he advised, in a confidential tone. "That shows we were on the wrong track all the time. You're all right—all right, I say!"

This rough comfort perhaps aided Natalie in controlling her sobs. And when Mr. Kester told her to come up into the office, she wiped her eyes and followed him.

Of course, she had lost more than half a day's time; but she was glad she had done so. The cloud which had overshadowed her so long at the store was lifted. She did not fear Mrs. Granger's sharp tongue now.

The police commissioner, with the bag in his hand, followed them into the office.

"A most regrettable incident," he said, over and over again. But when he sat down and began fumbling with the bills, he added:

"Without this young lady we might not have found the bag at all, I presume, Mr. Kester?"

"It was her idea, Misder Granger," declared the old gentleman.

"And she thought of it just in time—just in time," returned the other. "Well—it seems allowable—yes—it seems as though some little thing to reward her——"

He had drawn forth a five-dollar note. Old Mr. Kester's eyes flashed.

"No, sir! No, sir!" he exclaimed. "We couldt not allow one of our clerks to accept pay for such a t'ing—no, sir. You haf de purse an' de money foundt. Idt iss enough," and he waved his fat hand as though only too glad to get rid of the police commissioner.

The latter put away the five-dollar bill, evidently nothing loath. Then he took his hat and

without another word of thanks to either Mr. Kester or Natalie walked out of the office.

"Vell!" snarled the old gentleman. "Dere goes it a mean man—yes? Fife tollars for findin' de pag undt two hunder' tollar. Ach! idt iss mean some beaples iss porn; ain'dt idt?"

"I—I don't care," sobbed Natalie, "as long as the bag and money are all right."

"Vell, you shall lose nodding," declared Mr. Kester, and pulled a ten-dollar bill from his own pocket and handed it to her quickly. "Idt iss vorth *that* for suspicion to be lifted from the whole store—yes?"

"Oh, Mr. Kester! how kind you are," cried Natalie, weeping again.

For now that the nervous strain was over the girl felt as though she had endured to the limit of her strength. She was trembling, and could not control her sobs.

"There, there, Mees Nat'lie," urged the old gentleman. "You go oudt undt take a valk in de air. You needt nodt to come back de whole day. I will make idt right mit Mr. Baum. Tomorrow iss anudder day yet, undt you vill feel petter."

The advice was good and kindly meant, and Natalie took it. But after she had walked as far as the Hill Park at the end of High Street she re-

membered so many things that she might do if she were at home this afternoon that she turned hasty steps in the direction of the Vesey Street cottage.

When she came home she found Mose with Jim Hurley's wheel-chair in the yard, and Jim himself sitting beside Laura on the back steps. Rose and Lucille were playing house nearby.

"For pity's sake!" exclaimed Laura, springing up. "What is it?"

"You're not sick, are you, Natalie?" demanded Jim, quite as eagerly.

"Oh, no. I'm all right," said Natalie, happily. "I'm *righter* than usual, in fact."

"Then they haven't bounced you at that old store?" demanded Laura, with evident disappointment.

"No, indeedy!"

"I wish they would," her sister declared, gloomily.

"I'd like to know what we'd do *then?*" the oldest of the four cried.

"There'd be some way made," Jim said, evidently feeling the same as Laura.

"Everybody's talking about your working there," said Laura.

"They cannot say anything very bad—and be honest," returned Natalie, scornfully.

"It isn't what is expected of you, Natalie," said Jim. · "Even mother says *that.*"

She turned on them then and a little fire burned in either cheek.

"I'd like to know what really *is* expected of Natalie Raymond? Is she to sit down, and fold her hands, and let everything go to the eternal bow-wows?

"I am doing the first thing that came to hand—the only job I could get or was fitted for. They all praised my valedictory when I read it, yet, because I am putting the silly thing into practise, everybody is opposed.

"And not one of you can suggest another practical thing for me to do. You all make me tired!"

And it must be confessed that Natalie went into the house in something of a temper. But everybody was so silly. And they didn't have a single practical suggestion to offer.

She peeped into her mother's room. Mrs. Raymond was sleeping. So she went to her own room to change her dress for something she could better work around the house in.

And there on her table lay a letter—one of those flat letters, with a business card in the corner, that she had already learned to look forward to with delightful expectancy.

She grabbed it up, with almost a shout of exultation. The card in the corner read: "*Our Twentieth Century Home.*"

She slit the flap of the envelope carefully with her paper cutter. Then she opened it and shook out the contents upon her desk-blotter.

A little, narrow slip of paper was with the letter. She could not be mistaken, and pounced upon it.

The check was for twenty-five dollars!

Natalie held it between thumb and finger for a full minute, staring at the figures which *would* dance before her eyes.

"Oh! you beautiful thing!" she cried, and then sank slowly into her chair, with her elbows on the table.

She really kissed the slip of paper that meant so much to her. And then, with a sudden rush of tears and thankfulness, she dropped her head upon her folded arms and sobbed.

Twenty-five dollars would do so much for them. Twenty-five dollars and ten dollars made thirty-five!

"I can pay this, and that, and the other," Natalie's anxious thought ticked off their needs with precision.

Suddenly she bethought her that she did not

yet know what the check was for. She picked up the letter and read as follows:

"Miss Natalie Raymond,
"32 Vesey Street, Burlingboro.
"Dear Miss Raymond:

"I have liked your little story, 'The Robbers of the Year,' so much (for which you will find our check enclosed for $25) that I would like to see more of your work. I note that you have submitted some brief juvenile articles, and take pleasure in saying that I believe you have a style and method of expression that would please our young readers. I have had in mind the establishment of a certain kind of juvenile department in *Our Twentieth Century* that I believe would appeal to you. Will you come in and see me about this, providing you are willing to consider an associate editorship, or 'department editorship,' as we call it? At your own convenience.

"Respectfully yours,
"OUR TWENTIETH CENTURY HOME."

The girl read the letter through twice before she fully realized what it meant. The check had been a Godsend; but this letter was something more—something that promised greater things!

A letter from a *real* editor! And he spoke

highly of her work, and wanted more of it—more stories like "The Robbers of the Year." And, in addition, there was a chance for her to obtain some regular work which carried with it, of course, a regular salary.

Suppose the department work he spoke of would bring her in as much—or more—money as she received now from Kester & Baum? Or, suppose it was work which, if it paid less, she might do nights and still keep her place in the dry-goods store?

The summer had been hard on her. She had grown thin and hollow-eyed. After her hard work at school during the spring, this steady, plodding effort through the summer had come near to breaking down Natalie's naturally buoyant health.

And suppose here *was* the way out?

She felt that it was her fate to write. Her pen was the wand with which she could transform thoughts into dollars.

Natalie wanted to tell somebody of her good fortune; and yet she wished to keep it secret from mother and the girls for a bit. She went to the bathroom, dabbed her eyes and cheeks with cool water, and then put on her hat and gloves once more and took letter, check and all, away with her.

Jim Hurley was hobbling up and down the walk in the back garden beside Laura, and both were so

much interested in their conversation that they did not see Natalie when she hurried away from the house again.

It was to her "literary godfather," Mr. Franklin, the kindly editor of the Burlingboro *Banner*, that she made her way so quickly.

"Shall I go? Do you think I can do what they want done, Mr. Franklin?" cried the girl, eagerly.

"Do it? Of course you can! Brave girl! Smart girl!" exclaimed the editor, in delight. "I knew it was in you, child. You'll make a big hit some day. You're born to be a writer—not to sell notions over Kester & Baum's counter."

CHAPTER XIV

MR. VAN WEIR

THE money in her purse made Natalie feel really rich. Of course it cost nearly a dollar every time she went to New York; but she felt that this letter from the editor of *Our Twentieth Century Home* must be answered in person.

It was true, however, that before she reached the Vesey Street cottage again that evening much of the thirty-five dollars had gone to pay urgent bills. But the payment of those bills had been a delight.

"I'll be so, so happy," declared Natalie, to herself, "if I ever get to that point where I won't have to run a single bill! It—it will be just heavenly!"

She felt so rich, indeed, that she took home a little treat for the children, and for Mummy-kins. The four girls grouped about their mother's couch in the gloaming (for Mrs. Raymond was out of bed a part of the time now) eating ice cream and nibbling wafers, chattered like magpies over Natalie's good fortune.

"I don't see how you have got along as you

have, child," Mrs. Raymond said, shaking her head. "You must be horribly in debt."

"No, no—very little in debt at all. And if I get many more twenty-five-dollar checks for stories, I shall soon have a bank account," and Natalie laughed delightedly.

"Then it won't matter so much if I *do* stub out my shoes?" asked Rose, gravely.

"I don't know about that," returned the oldest of the four, gaily, and pinching Rose's plump cheek. "I believe we'll have to let you and Lucille run barefoot so as to save shoe-leather."

"Oh, but then we'll wear our feets out!" declared Lucille, her eyes round with wonder.

Natalie considered it well to remain away from the store the next day, and to see the editor in New York at once. If nothing came of the interview, or if it were best to settle down again to the store work, it was better to know the worst—or the best—without breaking into the store time later.

"Perhaps this editor will think I am awfully hungry for the job," Natalie told Laura and Jim, who came over to congratulate her. "And I *am*. I never wanted anything so much in my life as I do this work."

"Well, for goodness' sake! I should hope so," Jim declared. "When you've been tied to that old notion counter. I only hope he offers you an

awfully nice job, Nat—as long as you are so determined to work."

"Why, you make me laugh, Jimmy-boy," returned Natalie, with her elder sisterly air. "I am determined to *eat*—and there never was a Raymond with a butterfly appetite."

She took an early train to New York and, fearing that the editor of the magazine would not yet be in his office, she went to Wall Street to try and see Mr. Favor.

But the boy in the outer office assured her that the senior partner of Favor & Murch had gone away a month before and had not yet returned. He was ill and the boy understood that he was taking no active part in the management of the firm.

Much as she shrank from doing so, Natalie thought it her duty, these being the circumstances, to send her name in to Mr. Murch. She must plead with him about the matter of her father's wallet.

Surely, if it had been put carelessly in some pigeonhole of Mr. Murch's desk, he would remember it now, and give it to her. And even if the money her father had sent home to them at the time of the wreck was a very little sum, it would surely "come in handy."

But Mr. Murch returned her card by the boy,

sending out word that he was too busy to see her. And the boy added that it would be no use for her to wait.

"The boss'll be jest as busy as he is now all day," he said, with a grin.

Somehow the young girl felt that the boy was laughing at her. She could not understand why Mr. Murch refused to see her.

But, worried as she was by this puzzlement, she put it out of her mind as she neared the office of *Our Twentieth Century Home,* just before noon. It was situated in one of the tallest office buildings on Madison Square.

As she went up in the elevator, Natalie began to feel some little nervousness. And the wait in the anteroom of the magazine office did not discourage the beating of the girl's heart.

It seemed a busy place. The girl at the desk telephoned to the managing editor's private office for her, and repeated Natalie's name to him over the wire.

There were several other people waiting. One was a middle-aged woman with rather frowsy hair, the fingers of whose gloves were worn to holes. She wore spectacles, and read a voluminous manuscript under the drop light at the centre-table.

Suddenly there came from the inner corridor a tall, well set-up young man—broad-shouldered,

smoothly shaven—an almost boyish face, indeed. Natalie, at first glance, saw that he had a merry brown eye and a kind face despite his very square jaw. His chin was deeply cleft and—if the truth must be told—he had a most generously formed pair of ears!

"Ah! Mr. Van Weir!" exclaimed the frowsy lady, jumping up, quickly. "I was hoping to see you. I have something here—and from a new writer—that I believe you can't afford to miss——"

"Now, Miss Parling, I am sorry to say I am very busy this morning," replied the young man, waving away the manuscript which, Natalie saw, must have already seen hard usage in many publishers' offices.

"But this is something *very* special," declared Miss Parling. "I couldn't let you miss it."

"Why it looks as bulky as a three-volume novel," the young man declared.

"Ah! But *such* a novel——"

"You agents are all alike, Miss Parling. You always bring me what I *don't* want. I have no need of a novel for a year to come."

"But—now, *do,* Mr. Van Weir——"

"Let our readers have it. They will report upon it," said the young man, and Natalie saw that he could be brusk if it were necessary.

He swung around quickly and glanced over the other waiting people. Then he startled Natalie by saying:

"Miss Raymond! Is Miss Raymond here?"

Natalie rose timidly. She was a little to one side of the big young man and he did not at first see her.

"I thought you said Miss Raymond wished to see me?" he said, wheeling upon the girl at the desk.

Then he came face to face with Natalie.

"*You're* not Miss Raymond?" he exclaimed.

Natalie's heart sank. Her voice trembled when she spoke and was so low that she was ashamed of herself! Evidently her youthfulness had surprised him.

"Not Miss Natalie Raymond?" repeated Mr. Van Weir.

The girl merely nodded.

"And you wrote that perfectly bully story—'The Robbers of the Year?'" demanded Mr. Van Weir, seizing her hand quickly. "Why! you're a *find*—a *find!* I've told our folks so. And—and you're just a—a young lady out of school, I'll be bound?"

Natalie did not know what to say. Through a mist she saw the frowsy woman looking at her

with a cold, calculating gaze. And everybody else in the room was interested.

"Come into my office," said Mr. Van Weir, like a great boy, scarcely letting go of her hand. "We can talk there. Why, this is just *bully!* A girl who can turn out stuff like 'The Robbers of the Year' has got it in her to write—sure! Come in, Miss Raymond!" and he urged her into a big, well-furnished office, and closed the door with his foot.

"Sit down, Miss Raymond—do," he said, placing a chair for her and then, when she was seated, dropping into his own big revolving chair before the mahogany desk-table.

"Now, tell me all about it!" cried Mr. Van Weir, in his hearty way. "Did you just *have* to write?"

Natalie was almost startled. How could this pleasant young man suspect her circumstances? She thought that she looked particularly well in this dress, even if it *was* of last spring's fashion. She had kept it nice for state occasions.

"Nobody but a born writer—and a lover of the game, I am sure—could have put that very pretty story of yours down on paper."

Natalie understood, then. He meant did she have to write because the thoughts crowded her brain, and must be expressed?

"I AM SIXTEEN," ADMITTED NATALIE, TIMIDLY.
Page 131.

"I suppose that is so—in a sense," she said, thoughtfully. "At any rate, the story you were kind enough to buy 'wrote itself' in its first form. But I worked over it a good deal before it reached you."

"That's all right. The germ of the idea was involuntary, however—you did not have to force it. I could tell," he declared.

"And, tell me! How long have you been writing—for the press, I mean?"

"Mr. Franklin, of the *Banner,* has been printing my pieces for more than a year," explained Natalie.

"Your local paper?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good practise! Bully good practise," he declared, and the girl began to see that he was not such a very young man, after all. And yet, he was one of those men who would *always* be boyish—always enthusiastic—always expecting, and therefore getting, the very best out of life.

"But you're young, Miss Raymond," he said, suddenly.

"I am sixteen," admitted Natalie, timidly.

"And just out of school?"

"I graduated from the Burlingboro High last June."

"Going to college?" he asked her, quickly.

"Oh, no! That would be impossible."

"Forget that word!" he exclaimed, with his jolly laugh. "Like 'can't', they've agreed to cut it out of all the standard dictionaries."

"I am afraid," said Natalie, with a grave smile, "that it is like the word 'fail' which they tell us is not to be found in Youth's Lexicon; yet I guess most everybody finds it there just the same!"

"Good! A hit—a palpable hit!" chuckled the editor. "But a college course would help."

"I am afraid I cannot be helped that way," Natalie told him, shaking her head. "There are needs at home——Why, Mr. Van Weir! I am working behind the notion counter of one of our local dry-goods stores."

She thought this would startle him—and it did. He leaned forward, a hand on either knee, and stared at her hard.

"Do you mean it, Miss Raymond?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. My father was lost when the *Sakonnet* sank last June——"

"You're not the daughter of that poor man—the single missing passenger of the *Sakonnet?*"

"Yes, sir. I am his oldest daughter—the oldest of four. And my mother is an invalid. We were left in—in rather straitened circumstances, Mr. Van Weir. It has been very necessary that I should earn money."

"Well, well!" he said, shaking his head. "I couldn't imagine the author of 'The Robbers of the Year' serving behind a—a—*notion* counter, did you say?"

"Yes, sir."

"I can't imagine it."

"And cooking at home—and washing dishes—and scrubbing floors," said Natalie, with a sudden little laugh, for his face *did* look funny. "Genius at the washtub. The Muse of Literature sweeping the front hall."

He shouted at that.

"You're all right, Miss Raymond! I admit I had woven quite a different fancy about you—as the author of that pretty little story, mind! I thought you would be a little, frail, timid maiden-lady of uncertain years, with graying hair and a little, old-fashioned brooch at your throat, and a shabby black dress, perhaps."

Natalie clasped her hands, her eyes dancing.

"That would be just *lovely!*" she cried. "I'd like to fill that picture, Mr. Van Weir; but I fall so far short of it. But it would be—just—too—sweet——"

Her voice fell away thoughtfully. His own sharp eyes watched her shrewdly.

"What is it? What's the idea, Miss Raymond?" he asked.

"It *is* an idea, I believe. And *such* a good one. I believe it would make another story."

"I knew it!" cried the editor, smiting his knee. "With such a little lady in it, and such another fellow as *I* am?"

She flushed quickly at that question, for he had guessed correctly.

"Good! Don't mind me. I don't mind if you put me in a story. Only let *Our Twentieth Century* have the first chance at it."

And it was there and then that the germ of "Partners in Crime" came into Natalie's mind, took form and shape, and was finally developed into her second successful short story.

CHAPTER XV

THE BORROWED CHAPERON

HARVEY VAN WEIR was the very nicest young man that Natalie had ever met. She told herself that several times during this interview.

For he *was* young, after all. Years do not always make a person old, and as has been pointed out years would never make Harvey Van Weir aged.

The conversation so far had not touched upon the matter which had brought Natalie to town. It was the editor of *Our Twentieth Century Home* himself who brought the subject to the fore.

"Now, I've read your brief sketches which you submitted," Mr. Van Weir said. "We have never been satisfied with our children's pages. There has not been in them the originality which, I flatter myself, marks the adult fiction pages of *Our Twentieth Century.*"

"Your sketches, while very good, are not at all what I want."

Natalie's face fell at this, but he only smiled, and shook his head.

"You are not yet long enough at the game to

put on the whole armor," and he laughed. "You must learn to take awful set-backs, the carping criticism born of the pangs of indigestion, and the like. Let not your features show how deep the scourge of the critic cuts."

"Oh, I couldn't *bear* to have the little things I write harshly treated," sighed Natalie.

"You'll get over that. You'll *have* to. Sharp are the wounds of the friendly editor. Bear up and be prepared, Miss Raymond. He will flay thee alive—cut to the very bone."

"I hope not!" she cried, shaking her head.

"And yet, that is the way *good* magazines are made. How many articles, and stories, do you suppose, appear to the reader's eye as they come, at first, from the author's pen?"

Natalie remembered the changes she had made, at Mr. Franklin's advice, in "The Robbers of the Year," and shook her head.

"Mighty few. What, do you suppose, an editor is for?"

"I have heard it said," she replied, smiling, "that he was a dispensation of Providence."

Mr. Van Weir laughed at this—one of his jolly, whole-souled laughs.

"I guess he is. He is the buffer between the public and a lot of very *raw* work. Not that I wish to intimate that yours is raw, Miss Raymond.

You have been to school to a good master—I can see that. Your Mr. Franklin has shown you how to round off the sharp edges to a degree.

"Not that these sketches you have submitted are not quite good enough to be printed," he repeated, wagging an index finger before her. "But they are not what *I* want. You have it in you, however, to write just what I want, I feel sure."

"Oh, Mr. Van Weir!" she returned. "I hope you are not mistaken. I will truly do my best."

"Then you are not enamored of selling notions behind the counter?" he questioned, with sudden roguishness in his eyes.

"I *hate* it!" she admitted.

"Good! that being the case we will proceed to find something else for budding genius to stoop to."

"Do-on't, please, don't!" Natalie begged. "This is *so* serious—to me."

"Bless us! I expect it is," said Mr. Van Weir, suddenly. "We'll get down to business. Here is the rough idea I have drawn up of the pages we wish to devote to the children," and he flipped a printer's "dummy" before her.

"Do you catch the idea? There will be considerable writing—little squibs, fillers, and those comments on juvenile letters that give spice to such a department.

"Now," said the managing editor, suddenly serious, "you can do most of this work at home, I am sure. You will not have to come to the office but once a week—not more than twice at the most. Can you spare so much time, do you think?"

"But, Mr. Van Weir! I cannot do this while I work in the store," gasped Natalie.

"I—should—say—not!" cried the editor. "Don't you suppose that the firm you work for could be led to let you go?"

She looked at him for half a minute, with clasped hands and shining eyes.

"Well, Miss Raymond?" he asked, his own eyes laughing at her.

"Could—would it *pay* me?" she finally gasped.

"I don't know. It would not take all of your time. We do not pay great salaries here, nor enormous prices for contributions. And this is a good deal of an experiment. What do you say to fifteen dollars for a beginning?"

Natalie's heart sank. She wanted to try the work—she wanted to try it more than she had anything in her whole life before!

But fifteen dollars a month—if she had to give up the store—was not enough.

"I do not know how valuable you have proven yourself to be to the dry-goods firm, Miss Raymond," pursued Mr. Van Weir. "But when you

come to consider that you will be paid at our usual rates for anything you may write which is acceptable for other pages of *Our Twentieth Century,* fifteen a week is not so bad——"

"*A week!*"

Natalie's voice was quite hoarse with surprise, and she started to her feet.

He was the very quickest man to understand! He threw his head back and laughed one of his hearty, whole-souled laughs, and Natalie recovered her equilibrium.

"I take it you are agreed, Miss Raymond?" he said, finally.

"Indeed I *am,*" she said; and just then a lad entered with a bundle of proofs and another with some manuscript, while the telephone at his elbow rang sharply.

Mr. Van Weir attended to these three interruptions in the briefest possible time, and then said, smiling:

"However they came to let us alone so long I do not rightly understand, Miss Raymond. But now, I expect, having begun, they will all be down on me. Until 12:15, when I always go out to luncheon, I shall have my hands full.

"But I want to settle this matter to-day. I want to talk to you and explain my ideas. I know you can grasp them and whip the first number of

the department into shape for the first October number. That goes to press in a week's time, you understand."

"Oh, Mr. Van Weir!" cried Natalie. "Do you really think I can do it?"

"Surest thing you know."

"But with so little preparation?"

"Why not? We'll make a stab at it, anyway. Now, you just wait. Sit over there and look over the magazines. Make yourself at home. We'll talk this over to-day and get you fairly started on it. I've got my mind set on giving the kiddies something their mothers and fathers will bless *Our Twentieth Century* for. You see."

The young girl retired to the background and Mr. Van Weir returned to his work. He seemed to be an extremely methodical, as well as a busy man. He cleared off one side of his desk in a hurry. A dozen people came in and out. The telephone rang more than once in the next half-hour, too.

By and by he rang for a stenographer, and there and then dictated half a dozen letters so rapidly that Natalie wondered how the girl who took the notes could ever write so fast.

He seemed never at a loss for a word, and the letters were soon out of the way. He saw and approved, or discarded, certain illustrations that

artists brought in, consulted with an assistant, stuck a bunch of manuscripts in his coat pocket to read later in the day, and then got his hat and cane and told her he was ready.

"I have to conserve time to the uttermost, Miss Raymond. Now, if you will do me the honor, I would like to take you to luncheon, where we can talk over the details of this department."

Natalie stood up, but hesitated and blushed a little. Then she said, simply:

"If you don't mind, I would rather not go to luncheon with you alone at our very first meeting."

The brown eyes twinkled merrily at her, but Mr. Van Weir replied, with perfect gravity:

"You are perfectly right, Miss Raymond. We need a chaperon, and one we shall have. Are you quite ready? Then let us go foraging—first for the chaperon, and then for luncheon."

They descended in the crowded elevator and reached the street. This, and the neighboring buildings, were like bee-hives at this hour. And fully half of these hurrying to lunch, as Natalie noted, were young girls. Many of them were no older than herself.

"Now, Miss Raymond," said Mr. Van Weir, "cast your eyes about and select that type of chaperon which you like best. You can scarcely

make any mistake, I think, for most everybody on the street here just now is bound luncheonward.

"When you have selected the lady you fancy, we will follow her, and wherever she goes to eat, *we* will go. If it is the ordinary restaurant she enters we will get seats at her table, and if Mrs. Grundy herself should come spying upon us, how can she be offended?"

Natalie had to laugh at this suggestion. But she entered into the sport of borrowing a chaperon—even if the chaperon selected did not know of the office to which she had been nominated!

Almost at once she caught sight of a middle-aged lady who had left one of the offices, and in much merriment the two new friends followed her to a quiet tea-room on a side street of which even her own mother, Natalie was sure, would approve.

The tables were so small that Natalie and Mr. Van Weir took the very next one to that at which the unconscious chaperon sat. But before they were through, it must be confessed, Natalie had forgotten all about this sop thrown to the proprieties.

She became so much interested in the editor's plans for the new department, in fact, that she quite forgot to eat, until he insisted upon her doing some small justice, at least, to what he had ordered.

There at the little table they planned what was to appear in the pages of her department for the first number, and Natalie parted from Mr. Van Weir and caught a mid-afternoon train back to Burlingboro, so full of the new project and so delighted with the result of her visit to the offices of *Our Twentieth Century Home* that her feet almost danced as she hurried toward the Vesey Street cottage.

CHAPTER XVI

MANY INVENTIONS

And now Natalie could come out from behind the counter at Kester & Baum's store!

The thought was a joyful one to Natalie herself, and delighted Laura. Yet the oldest of the four Raymond girls was neither ungrateful for the experiences of the summer, nor was it her pride that made her so glad to graduate from the notion counter.

She had done her best in the humble position, too; and her best had been so good that when she went in and told Mr. Kester of the better paid employment she had obtained, the old gentleman expressed himself as very sorry indeed to have her leave.

"You vill long pe remembered here, Miss Nat'lie," he declared, warmly. "You are bot' a goot girl, and a smart girl. If you do not succeed where you are going, come back here. We vill findt you somet'ing petter as de notions, maype."

Sadie and Helena were sorry to see her go, too; indeed, all the clerks bade Natalie a warm goodbye.

Her work was to begin at once, and Mr. Van Weir had told her that the check for her salary would be mailed her each Friday evening.

"It seems too good to be true!" she told herself, over and over again.

The new work came in handily for Laura, too. September brought the opening of school and the second sister had not made any preparations to go. Laura had been very nice about it—somehow, she had gained much in thoughtfulness during this hard summer.

But now there was no reason in the world why she should not go to school as Natalie would practically be at home all of the time. Of course, Rose went daily; but neither their mother, nor Lucille, could be left alone.

Mrs. Raymond's state, although better than it was at first, remained now most trying. She had settled into an apathy from which nothing seemed to rouse her longer than a few minutes at a time.

Of course, neither she, nor the girls themselves, could hope now that Mr. Raymond would ever appear. Even Natalie had lost her last faint glimmer of hope. Father was lost to them forever, and she tried not to let her mind dwell upon the fact.

With this new work that she so loved, Natalie

reorganized her whole existence. Fifteen dollars a week was a sufficient sum to pay all their living expenses, providing they did not live extravagantly. And she hoped, in addition, to gradually pay the small outstanding debts and never have to ask credit again.

But there was one thing loomed up before her like a hobgoblin in a dream. November first was approaching, and on that date the semi-annual interest on the mortgage came due.

Her father had left money for the settlement of the last interest when he went away, and it had been paid. But how she was to find thirty dollars, " all in a lump," by the first of November Natalie did not know.

For fifteen dollars a week did not solve all their problems. It merely put them upon a better basis of living than they had had before. With its coming, too, Natalie had new expenses.

At least once each week she would have to appear in the offices of *Our Twentieth Century Home.* And occasionally she had to pay telephone tolls to the office. Besides, she had given many of her little sketches and stories a new lease of life in the mails, and they were going back and forth with quite business-like regularity.

In these fugitive pieces she placed some hope. Extra checks might come in to help pay that thirty-

dollar interest bill. She worked hard, too, upon the book—a piece of work which she kept entirely secret from all the family, as well as from Mr. Franklin himself. She worked on it only at night, after the rest of the family were asleep, and kept the manuscript locked in her table drawer.

She realized that it was a bold experiment—a young and inexperienced girl like her attempting a real book.

There were times, too, when it seemed as though she had come to the end of her resources—as though she could not invent another scene to put into "Her Way Out"; and then something would happen in her own life—her *real* life—which would suggest to Natalie another complication for her heroine.

Mr. Franklin was as proud as he could be over her success with the editor of the magazine. Natalie still gave him articles for his literary edition on Saturdays; but anything that he thought was particularly good he refused and advised her where to send it.

This first week of her new engagement, however, Natalie was completely wrapped up in the children's department for *Our Twentieth Century Home*. She had little thought for anything else.

When it was complete, she took her material

and the rough dummy of the pages over to the office and had another interview with Mr. Van Weir. This interview was purely business; yet Natalie was sure that she had never met anybody quite like the editor before.

Most of her work he approved warmly; she changed the arrangement of some few pieces, and finally he said "it would do" and she went home again to begin work on the second number.

Mrs. Hackett had looked after the house and her mother and Lucille while Natalie was in the city. She came back in the evening to bring "her secretary," as Laura laughingly dubbed the oldest sister, a letter from Pat.

"Sure, an' if he don't bes writin' his old mother often, he makes up for it when he *does* write," declared the good woman, displaying three or four badly scrawled sheets of paper.

"And what does he say, Mrs. Hackett?" asked Laura, secretly smiling.

"Sure, an' I've not me specs with me," declared the old woman, boldly. "It's Miss Nat'lie will have to be radin' it aloud to us."

With this declaration she handed the letter to Natalie, and then settled back in her chair, her hands crossed comfortably in her lap, and her little blue eyes twinkling happily in anticipation of her absent boy's letter.

Natalie read it slowly, not forbearing to smile when she came to the typical Irish "bull" in the very first paragraph of Pat's letter:

"Dear Mother:

"It's some time since I got that letter from you —which same was writ, I'll be bound, by Mr. Frank Raymond's oldest girl, Miss Natly. I remember her well and it's like she's growed to be a pretty enough young lady. You must let her read this to you, for I've something to write about that's bound to interest her.

"I've a new job, driving for a gent. who's just come from the North to settle here in New Orleans—leastwise he's not had his business here for long. He don't like the naygurs for servants no better nor I do, and so, tellin' him I was an honest Irish lad, he hired me for coachman at once.

"This was only a month agone; but the place is easy, the pay is prompt, and the table is good. I've no fault to find, and he's a little girl of our Katy's age, that I've taken a shine to and she to me. 'Tis 'Pat, here' and 'Pat, there' with her, and sure nobody else suits her like Patsy Hackett, if I do say it who shouldn't.

"It was she told me first about how she and her father started to go North in June by sea, and how

they were aboard that ship that was sunk off a place called Hattie Rast—sure, 'tis no schollard I be, so I don't know where it is but 'tis named for some woman, belike, and the sea and wind is as unsartain there as is a woman's temper.

"However, it wasn't until the little girl had talked about the wreck a deal that I know'd you, or me, or Miss Natly would be interested in it. And then your letter come and in it you told about Mr. Frank Raymond being lost at sea. So it is me took and put two and two together, and finally went to my master and asked him was it so.

"And he says he and the child was brought back to New Orleans on the *Pancoast* freighter, being taken out of the first mate's boat while it was tossin' in them troubled seas. So he did put off his business trip to New York, and will go by train, anyway, the next time.

"However, this isn't my news. It's about Mr. Frank Raymond. He was aboard that boat that sunk, and my master says he was a fine man, and helped the other passengers. He has Mr. Frank's coat himself, with some few letters and papers in the pockets. Mr. Frank took it off on the deck of the sinking steamer and put it around this little girl that I tell you about—the little girl like Katy.

"She was shivering, and Mr. Frank stripped to

his shirt-sleeves, and when they went over the side into the first officer's boat, Mr. Frank stood at the rail and cheered for 'em.

" 'Tis told me that Mr. Frank ain't never been found. They say he was drowned. But my master said he died like a brave gentleman, and the little girl prays for him each night——"

Natalie could read no more—not just then. Laura was long since in tears, and Mrs. Hackett was sobbing into her checked apron.

" Wisha, the big fool Pat always was!" she complained. " Puttin' all that into his letter, an' thin tellin' me to let Miss Nat'lie rade it. Sure, he never *did* have the sinse of a goney."

But Natalie came back from her room after a bit and finished reading the letter from the warm-hearted Irish lad to his mother.

Nor was the story he told lacking in a certain quality of comfort for the Raymond girls. Again fellow-sufferers from the wrecked *Sakonnet* had praised their father's nobility and courage.

At the end of his letter, Pat Hackett said that the man he worked for proposed bringing the coat and unimportant papers in it North when he came and would deliver them to Mrs. Raymond in person. It was something to look forward to, although it offered no hope to the

girls that they would ever see their father alive again.

But it *did* strengthen in Natalie's mind the thought of the story of the other survivor of the *Sakonnet* who had praised Mr. Raymond's course in the trying hour when the ship rolled, helpless, in the seas off Hatteras.

Mr. Middler, a man of wealth and prominence, had spoken of her father, and had undertaken to deliver Mr. Raymond's wallet to his firm. And, it seemed, by either misfortune or direct villainy, the lost man's family were kept from receiving the wallet, or from benefiting by that last act of Mr. Raymond's devotion.

"It is too, too hard!" thought Natalie. "I believe Mr. Murch is deceiving us about that wallet. For some reason he doesn't wish us to have it. And *why?* Surely, such a little amount of money as there could have been in it would be of no moment to a man in Mr. Murch's position."

She could not shake off the feeling, however, that the junior partner of her father's firm was inclined to wrong them. Every time she visited New York on the business of her department in the magazine, she hesitated about calling at Favor & Murch's office again.

It was growing late in the fall now; perhaps the senior partner had returned from his long vacation.

He had long been ailing; but perhaps he had come back with renewed vigor to take up his business duties again.

So she tried once more to see Mr. Favor. The boy remembered her, and grinned as he had before.

"Why, Mr. Favor's gone to Europe," the boy declared. "He's gone to some place to take mud baths, they tell me. Don't know when he *will* be back."

Good reason, then, why her letters to him had not been answered. He was much too far away—if not too ill—to take any interest in her troubles.

She asked again to see Mr. Murch, and the boy came back grinning, with the same answer. He was too busy to see her, and it was no use for her to wait.

So, it seemed, to get her father's wallet, with the little money in it that might be of aid to her when November first came around, was impossible. Natalie wondered if it would be wise to go to Mr. Middler's house again and interview that gentleman's secretary.

"He could look up the receipt he said he got from Mr. Murch, and tell me the amount of money father sent home to us," thought the girl. "If it was only thirty dollars—only enough to pay this interest on the mortgage.

"Maybe by next spring, when it comes due

again, I shall have saved a sufficient sum to meet the note promptly."

So much did this trouble her mind that, one day, when she had been at the office of the magazine, she determined to try and see Mr. Middler's secretary. It was not far from the office building on Madison Square to Mr. Middler's house on Madison Avenue.

Natalie did not follow the movements of wealthy people through the gossip of the papers; so she was surprised to find Mr. Middler's house shut up tight—each lower window boarded and the front door masked in a plank fence. There was not even a care-taker in the house.

So this opening seemed closed to her, and she returned home that afternoon feeling very much depressed.

The mail had brought her no small checks for the sketches she had submitted to other publications besides *Our Twentieth Century Home.* Indeed, during these first weeks of her engagement on the children's department, she had little time or thought for anything but the material she was to supply to those pages.

The first October issue appeared, and she read her own contributions with delight. Nor was Mr. Van Weir less delighted. He was sure the new department would make a hit with their readers,

and he insisted upon taking Natalie to luncheon again.

This time the young girl overlooked the absence of the chaperon. She saw that young women in business were forced to assume a shell of independence that would not be permissible under different conditions.

If one must go out into the world to "buff for oneself," as the saying is, one must accept the conditions which the world of business offers, to a degree. Natalie had, too, a very high opinion of Harvey Van Weir.

But Natalie Raymond was a working woman. She was self-supporting. Beyond that, she had the responsibility of the whole family on her shoulders and nobody could say that she had not supported this responsibility nobly.

If her father should come home——

No; she could not say *that* any longer. But if, looking down upon his four fatherless girls and the helpless mother from that Land to which she believed he had gone, he could see into Natalie's heart, and understand her motives, the oldest of four believed that he would approve, and bless her.

CHAPTER XVII

THE UNEXPECTED FRIEND

It was about this time that Natalie completed the short story that her first visit to Mr. Van Weir had suggested.

At first it did not please her; again it did. Never had she written anything of which she had been so uncertain as to its real quality.

She put it away in her desk drawer with the hidden manuscript of " Her Way Out "—the story which was now fast nearing completion. The next week, however, when it became necessary for her to go to the magazine office, she put " Partners in Crime " in her bag.

But in going over to New York on the train she read the little story through again and doubted if it was good enough to show to Mr. Van Weir. So she decided not to submit the manuscript until she could go over it with care again.

Much as she needed the money for the half-yearly interest on the mortgage she felt that she could not submit a manuscript to Mr. Van Weir that was not her very best work.

And interest day was drawing near. Natalie bore this coming trouble on her mind continually.

As she came up out of the tube she caught sight of a man ahead of her who she was sure was Mr. Murch. Here was the junior partner of Favor & Murch at a time when he could not send word out to her by a grinning boy that he was "busy."

The sight of the man spurred Natalie to action. She did not give herself time to become frightened, but hurried after him, reaching his side at the first corner.

"Mr. Murch!" she cried.

"Eh? What's this?" he demanded, turning to stare at her.

Evidently he did not know her, and Natalie said, quietly:

"I am Frank Raymond's daughter. I have been several times to the office to see you——"

"I have nothing to say to you," snapped the man, turning as though to hurry on.

"But, Mr. Murch!" she cried. "I will not take a minute of your time."

"Indeed you will not," he returned, in a most unpleasant tone; "for I don't propose to give it to you."

"Please—please listen to me, sir!" Natalie begged, almost in tears, and keeping by his side. "You are not being fair to me. There is something my father sent home that you have got——"

"What do you mean, girl?" snarled the man,

and turning swiftly, with his clenched hand raised, Natalie thought he would have struck her.

She shrank from him with a little cry; and as she did so a sturdy figure stepped between the girl and Mr. Murch. The latter's raised wrist was caught in a practised grip, and his clenched hand was forced down to his side, while the shoulder of Natalie's friend in need forced the astonished Murch against the wall behind him.

"That won't do—that won't do, I say!" growled the person who had thus interfered. "There's something wrong with you, boss. You can't hit a girl like that—and get away with it!"

He was a stocky young man, with quiet gray eyes and a very green hat with a velvet band—a loud hat. Natalie knew she had seen him before, but in this startled moment she could not place him.

"What is this—a conspiracy?" snarled Mr. Murch. "I'll have you both arrested—accosting a decent man in this way on the street. Let go of me!"

"Not till I know what's doing," growled the other.

Murch turned his head to look for a policeman; but the other jerked his arm, and he turned back with a cry of pain.

"I'll save you the trouble of looking," said the young man, and threw back his coat, giving Murch a sight of the little gold badge pinned near the armhole of his vest. The view was so brief that the merchant did not see that it was not a badge of the New York police.

"You are a detective?" exclaimed Murch, his manner changing instantly. "I did not know that. Then I demand your protection from this—this young woman."

Natalie had shrunk back from both men. But the young man gave her what was meant to be a reassuring look.

"You needn't be nasty about it, Mister," he said to Murch, giving that gentleman another little shake. "I happen to know this young lady. If she spoke to you, she had good reason to do so. Come on, Miss Natalie! What is it?"

Murch changed color again. His little eyes shot a glance from the Burlingboro detective to Natalie and back again. A close observer would have seen fear looking out of Mr. Murch's little eyes—and the detective was a close observer.

"Speak up," the latter said, encouragingly, to Natalie. "What did you want this man for, anyway?"

"He—he——My father worked for his firm," stammered Natalie, taking courage from the young

man's kindly look. "You know that he was lost when the *Sakonnet* went down?"

"Yes! Yes!" returned the detective.

"He worked for Favor & Murch. *This,*" said Natalie, unable to hide her disgust, "is Mr. Murch."

"I do not see why you hold me here to listen to all this," broke in Mr. Murch, plucking up courage. "We settled with these Raymonds after the man disappeared. His salary was paid in full—wasn't it?" he demanded of Natalie.

"Mr. Favor gave me the salary due to my father—yes," admitted the girl. "That is not why I accosted you to-day, and you know it."

"Hoity-toity!" exclaimed the merchant. "I know of no reason for your bothering me. I have nothing for you."

"You *had* something for us. You had my father's wallet. He sent it to the firm by a passenger who was saved from the wreck."

"Ha!" interrupted the detective. "I remember reading something about that in the newspapers. But no names were given."

"You'll read a good deal in the newspapers that isn't so," snapped Mr. Murch.

"Well, how about it?" queried the young man. "Didn't this man turn Mr. Raymond's wallet over to you?"

"Suppose I never received the wallet?" demanded Mr. Murch, quickly.

"Oh, but you did!" cried Natalie.

"Do you mean to say——"

"Aw, hush! hush!" begged the detective, admonishingly. "Let the young lady speak. Then you can have *your* say, Mister."

"This is entirely irregular," burst forth Mr. Murch. "I stand on my rights. I shall demand to have this matter taken to the police court——"

"Don't you be too previous, Mister," urged the detective. "You may get your wish." Then he turned to the girl, and asked: "How do you know this man got Mr. Raymond's wallet?"

"Mr. Middler's secretary told me so," she replied, simply.

Murch staggered back against the house-wall, and it was plain that her answer surprised him.

"Who's Mr. Middler?" asked the young man, curiously.

"He was the gentleman who knew my father on the *Sakonnet,* and who took charge of the wallet. He sent it by his secretary to father's firm."

"Sure-pop?"

"Yes, sir. The secretary gave it to Mr.

Murch, and Mr. Murch signed a receipt for it."

"Money in the wallet?"

"Yes, sir."

The detective wheeled on the cowering Murch and eyed him with disdain.

"How about that little trip to court that you spoke of, boss?" he said. "It's up to you."

But Mr. Murch was recovering from the shock. He drew himself up haughtily, saying:

"You evidently do not realize that in a matter like this a gentleman's word would go far before the court, while you and this girl would have little standing——"

"Forget it—forget it!" urged this very slangy but determined young man. "It don't go. Does the girl get her father's wallet; or don't she?"

"Why—now that I am reminded of it," said Mr. Murch, clearing his throat and trying his very best to look dignified, "I *do* remember something about the matter; but I handed the whole matter over to Mr. Favor at once, and forgot all about it."

"How's that, Miss Raymond?" queried the detective.

"Mr. Favor is in Europe, and he is ill. I have written to him twice——"

"No letters are sent to him," said Mr. Murch, hastily. "I fancy the old man was even more broken down than he appeared to be last summer before they took him to the mountains. He evidently forgot all about your affair," and he nodded at Natalie.

It was a lame excuse, but Mr. Murch saw his way out of the difficulty now.

"Like enough your father's wallet is in Mr. Favor's desk. There *was* some money in it, I remember; but no papers. Oh, no papers!"

The young man listened and eyed him closely. Natalie asked timidly:

"And is there no way in which the wallet can be recovered before Mr. Favor returns?"

"Why—I will take the responsibility of opening Mr. Favor's desk——"

"Good idea, boss," broke in the detective, promptly. "Go ahead; we'll come along with you and see the business through on the spot. Eh, Miss Raymond?"

Natalie could not refuse to accept his kind offer; besides, rough as this young police officer seemed, she was not afraid of him, while she had become more than a little frightened at the junior partner of Favor & Murch.

Mr. Murch started off ahead, but Natalie walked beside the young man in the green hat.

"I sure do hate a bluffer like *that,*" said the detective, with a strong emphasis of disfavor for Mr. Murch. "Of course, I was bluffing myself; I have no standing at this end of the tube. But I knew *you* were straight as a string, Miss Raymond, and so I knew he must be in the wrong."

Natalie was not quite sure that she grasped the full meaning of all of the young man's remarks; but she knew he had befriended her most unexpectedly, and she was too grateful to be a critic of his manner of speech.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE BOOK IS LAUNCHED

THEY waited in the outer office of Favor & Murch—Natalie and her "friend in need." Mr. Murch was gone some few moments; when he returned he brought a written receipt for Natalie to sign, and in it was mentioned the sum of money in Mr. Raymond's wallet.

It was twenty-seven dollars. The meagreness of the sum caused Natalie no surprise, for after her father had paid his passage home from Havana, it was likely that he would have little left of the amount he had taken with him when he started on his long business trip.

The detective took the shabby pocketbook in his hand and examined it carefully, as well as counting the bills.

"This was all you expected, Miss?" he asked Natalie, in a low voice.

"Yes, sir."

"How about papers? Didn't he send any?"

"Private papers referring to the firm's business, that was all," Mr. Murch interrupted, quickly. "The disappearance of Mr. Raymond is a very

—er—strange affair. I have been quite unable to understand it."

"Meaning?" suggested the detective, with a sudden intent look, and his eyebrows raised.

"We expected some returns from Mr. Raymond's long trip through the south and the West Indies. Either his business trip was a failure, or he neglected to send with his wallet the orders he may have accumulated," snapped Mr. Murch.

The detective weighed the wallet in his hand for a moment, and then passed it to Natalie, who quickly put it away in her bag.

"All right," said the young man, bruskly. "I guess we've got through here," and the girl was only too glad to get out of the office, and out of Mr. Murch's sight.

But once out of the place the young man did not immediately leave Natalie, but strolled along by her side. He seemed more than a little interested in her father's affairs, and the contract he had with Favor & Murch.

Finally, when he parted from her at the uptown entrance to the subway, he stood thoughtfully for as much as five minutes on the curb.

"There's something queer about that man, Murch. And there's something queer about his trying to do the hold-out act on that wallet," he muttered.

"It was not done for any twenty-seven dollars —not much! Something bigger than *that* behind it. And just what that man's little game is, is what's puzzling Pete Darby right now," and Mr. Darby gave his green hat a forward thrust, and strolled away with very thoughtful mien.

Meanwhile Natalie went uptown with a vast feeling of relief. Yet she had been so shaken by the adventure that Mr. Van Weir noted her condition instantly when she came into his office.

That this very busy editor should notice anything at all which troubled her privately, seemed a most surprising fact to Natalie. And he spoke so kindly to her, and was so sympathetic, that before she realized it she was deep in her own personal story and was telling him everything that had happened to her since the day of her graduation from high school.

"Why, it sounds like a book!" declared Mr. Van Weir, with one of his jolly laughs. "You are living a more romantic story than any you have yet written, I'll be bound."

"It does not seem romantic—not the tiniest bit," sighed Natalie.

"Oh, your perspective is entirely wrong," he declared, quickly. "But you can't help *that*. It is the reason why many, many people who travel and have staving adventures can't put their activities

down on paper. They're too near to the actual happenings to see their proper values."

"Perhaps that is so in my case," Natalie said, doubtfully. "But, really, Mr. Van Weir, the attempt to make both ends meet for a family of five is not in the least romantic. It is hard, bone labor!"

"I can believe you," he responded, with sympathy. "And you have had some pretty hard knocks. But maybe things will come better for you now. I want to assure you that the 'powers that be' are quite pleased with what you are doing for *Our Twentieth Century;* and I hope you will soon find time to try another story with me. I'll give it my individual attention."

Yet this did not encourage Natalie to display "Partners in Crime" at this time. She wished to change parts of it, and she must make another fair copy before showing it to Mr. Van Weir, whose opinion she considered of much value indeed.

There was another need Natalie felt, too,—and one that grew greater as time went on. She knew that, although she wrote a very readable hand, editors preferred typewritten manuscript. Some magazines even printed this request upon those "refusal blanks" of which she was making a fast increasing collection.

Natalie had never used a typewriter; but she had examined the one Mr. Franklin had, and she was sure she could easily learn to manipulate such a machine.

The cost of hiring one was three dollars a month in Burlingboro; Natalie could not see her way clear to such an expense, much as she needed the machine. It would be of great help in preparing her children's department, as well as her other work. And there was the book she was writing to be typed when it was done.

Yet every penny of her weekly salary "was spent before she got it," as she had to admit. Now that November first had come she was obliged to squeeze out three dollars from her little income to put with the twenty-seven her father had sent home.

And the recovery of her father's wallet and the money troubled her, too. She told Laura of it, for she was old enough to understand; but she dared not show the wallet to her mother, or introduce the subject in any way.

Mrs. Raymond began to worry over the interest money as the first of November approached; so Natalie told her that she need not do so, as the thirty dollars was ready for the mortgagee.

"Really, Natalie, I do not see how you do it. You are wonderful—wonderful," sighed the in-

valid. "And I could not see a way out for us at all!"

Nor could the oldest of four see the way out very clearly as yet. But she believed in it!

She believed religiously that, in time, she would be able to carry affairs comfortably from the proceeds of her writing. The way was hard, however, at times.

For a time, she could not get ahead on the book in which so much of her hopes had centred. She had got into that "slack water" state so much dreaded by the professional novelist, in which action refused to be spontaneous, character "slumped," and dialogue seemed forced and "woodeny."

She labored at every paragraph with as much soul-travail as whole chapters had previously demanded. Nothing seemed spontaneous; her mind was numb; inspiration had betaken itself to some other sphere.

She went to Mr. Franklin and confided in him at this juncture. The good old man was delighted to hear that she had grappled with a real book and had brought it along as far as she had.

"What! three-quarters done and just now feeling the first set-back?" he cried. "Famous! famous! You are doing splendidly."

"It's nothing of the kind," she cried. "I'm

doing awfully bad! You don't know. I can't invent another thing, and yet my plot is not yet logically worked out."

"Bring it down and let me see it, child. I do not believe it can be as bad as you say."

Natalie hesitated, smiled a little wistfully at him, and then drew forth the manuscript of "Her Way Out."

"It's here, Mr. Franklin," she said. "But I am imposing on your good nature, I fear ——"

"Thank heaven, I have some small supply of that same good nature left," declared the editor of the *Banner,* patting her hand. "And I welcome the chance to be the first to read your story.

"Remember, I am an old man, and old men do not sleep much as they go down the hill of life. Often I have to get up and light my reading-lamp and try to read myself into a somnolent mood."

"Then perhaps this will be a blessing to you," laughed Natalie, though rather ruefully. "I have read it over myself so many times that I believe it would put most anybody to sleep."

"We shall see, Natalie," he said, accepting the bulky parcel. "And I will take good care of it. Have you a copy?"

"No, sir."

"You should have it typed, child, and have a

carbon copy made. You really need a typewriter if you are going to be a real author."

"That may be; but with butter at forty cents, and eggs so high that I am ashamed to eat more than one at breakfast, I don't really see how I am to get such luxuries as typewriters."

But in her heart Natalie did not consider this matter of the writing machine quite so lightly. Before she submitted "Partners in Crime" to Harvey Van Weir she wished to have a fair copy made; and it would cost a dollar. She did not see how she could afford even *that*.

She had never been able yet to redeem the pin she had pawned back in the summer. Laura had several times asked her why she did not put on the pretty fleur-de-lis when she went to New York, for at those times Natalie tried to look her very best.

"As we have never gone into mourning for poor, dear papa, I don't see why you don't wear the very best you've got," Laura said, more than once.

And Natalie's "very best" was getting very shabby as well as old-fashioned. She had freshened up her old winter hat, and found that she possessed some taste in millinery matters.

So, taking hold of the family headgear, she proceeded to make over and smarten the hats of her

three sisters. This was easy for Lucille and Rose; but Laura was another matter.

"We really ought to have something *new*," said the twelve-year-old. "Do you realize, Nat, that neither of us have had as much as a new ribbon since graduation in June?"

"Nobody realizes that more deeply than *I* do, Laura," returned the oldest of the four, sadly.

"Oh, dear! I don't mean to complain for myself," Laura hastened to say. "Of course, the girls notice such things, and as they have all gotten new wraps and dresses for the winter, and I am still wearing last winter's clothes, they naturally *wonder*."

"Aren't there any other poor girls in your class at school?" inquired Natalie, quietly.

"Well—but— You know, my dear, we have always been able to keep up appearances. We owe it to ourselves," declared Laura, with a very old-fashioned air. "There is nothing that makes one so unpopular in class as shabby garments."

"My dear Laura," said the older sister, gravely, "we Raymonds have been able to keep up appearances, as you suggest, because we children—you and I particularly—have been utterly selfish."

"Why, Natalie! I don't see how you can say such things," Laura cried.

"Yes. It is true. Father had a very hard time, with mother ill so much and all, to keep us along as he did. You and I never questioned how the food came on the table, or how new clothing came from the shops."

"Well, I'm sure!"

"*And now we know!*" urged Natalie, hastily. "We cannot be selfish—or foolish—any more—can we?"

"Oh! But it's very hard," complained Laura, wiping her eyes. "If I've got to go to school looking as shabby as Clara Belle Thomas, or Emma George——"

"Who both stand well with the teachers, at least, I have no doubt."

"Well! Is *that* everything?" demanded Laura, rather warmly.

"It is in our case, Laura," said her sister, firmly. "You are going to school to prepare yourself for some means of earning your own support later. You must choose, too, this year, whether you wish to be a teacher, or will take up the commercial courses next year and graduate as a young lady much better able to be self-supporting than your elder sister," and Natalie laughed.

"And you were the valedictorian of your class!" cried Laura.

"That perfectly *silly* old valedictory!" groaned Natalie. "I'll never hear the last of that—will I?"

This conversation took place the very day she had taken her manuscript of the incomplete "Her Way Out" to Mr. Franklin. At six o'clock the next morning, just after Natalie opened her eyes, she heard something rattle against her window.

"Gravel!" she exclaimed, when it was repeated. "What under the sun can it mean? Who is it?"

She sprang out of bed, wrapped herself in a warm robe, slipping her feet into a pair of "mules," and shuffled to the window. Again the handful of gravel rattled against the glass.

It was a clear but still, dark morning. Natalie could only think that it was some of their boy, or girl, friends playing a joke upon her. Yet, what for?

She pulled aside the blind a little. There was but a single figure standing on the walk.

"Surely that's not Jim?" Natalie thought, and she was no more puzzled than she was frightened.

But when she saw the tall figure stoop as though to pick up more pebbles, she determined to hail him rather than run any further risk of her mother's being awakened.

She snapped up the shade and opened the sash.

"Natalie!" called a voice that she very well knew. Yet this discovery surprised her intensely.

"*Mr. Franklin!*" she cried, under her breath. "Whatever has brought you here so early? What's wrong?"

"You are!" he declared, chuckling. "And it is your fault that I am here. Put on something and come down."

Much mystified she did as he bade her, and let him come into the kitchen, which was still warm, as she had tried to keep the fire over night.

"Something must have happened," she cried. "What have I done?"

"Why, I'll tell you, young lady," declared the old gentleman, laughing at her. "You have dared write a story that has kept me reading until morning. And I want to know why you have not finished it?"

She could only stare at him in amazement.

"Go on! Pick up the threads of your plot, and continue in the way you have gone. What are you waiting for?" he demanded, with the eagerness of a much younger man.

"But—but—I did think the last two or three chapters were so forced——"

"Best of 'em all," interrupted Mr. Franklin, nodding his head wisely. "That's often the way.

The work which seems the least spontaneous is often the most readable—and vice versa.

"You must pick this story right up and go on with it. Don't neglect it, my dear. I can point out some places where you might improve it by shortening the scenes. And those very parts, I expect, were the ones that seemed to you 'inspired.'"

He told her how, waking past midnight and being unable to go to sleep again, he had begun her manuscript, and had finished it but an hour before.

"And I feel just as I do when I am foolish enough to read a part of a continued novel in a magazine—one that grips the reader and holds the attention. I want the rest of it!"

Natalie knew the editor of the *Banner* so well that she was sure this was not fulsome praise on his part. He always told her exactly what he thought of her work; and it had been, indeed, his just criticism that had aided her during the year and more of her apprenticeship, when she was writing only for the *Banner*.

So, encouraged by Mr. Franklin's praise, Natalie took hold of "Her Way Out" with renewed courage. It seemed easier, too, when she once more got into the story in earnest.

New possibilities opened up to her mind;

fresher complications and scenes were born of her imagination. She went on with the story to the end without a single halt; and, when she came to read it all over again, it seemed to her indeed very good.

With relief, yet with a certain disappointment that she was to lose the association of the characters she had created and had dwelt with in her dream-life for so long, Natalie completed her first long story. It was launched upon the sea of uncertainty—otherwise, upon the chance of its publication.

"Her Way Out" was ready to pass in stern review before publishers and their readers.

CHAPTER XIX

THE MAN FROM NEW ORLEANS

NATALIE had not neglected, however, either her regular work for the home magazine or her fugitive pieces that she submitted from house to house with a confidence that Laura said was nothing short of wonderful.

"Why, if *I* had all these chickens coming home to roost," declared the younger sister, bringing a batch of returned manuscripts up to Natalie's desk one morning. "I should give up all hope and—Yes!—I'd go back to Kester & Baum's."

"It is good for the young writer, I expect, to find that editors are not tumbling over each other to purchase her work," quoth Natalie. "At least, I am not likely to be over-stimulated by conceit."

Nevertheless, she *did* sell a couple of little sketches, which brought her, together, eight dollars. And this sum added to her regular salary was indeed appreciated.

As winter came on, more money must be found. The younger children needed warm garments, and heavier boots. It did seem to Natalie as though

one need was supplied only to make way for another. They came in an unending procession, and kept her worried all the time.

At last, she had dared take "Partners in Crime" to Mr. Van Weir. The editor took the manuscript with apparent pleasure, and made her sit right down as she was and wait for him to read it. He allowed nothing to interrupt his perusal of the story.

"Miss Natalie," he said, when he had finished, looking at her gravely, "you have a talent for pathos and character drawing that not all writers possess. I think you have been afraid to handle the character of the young man without gloves, because you knew that *I* knew I had suggested it. Eh?"

The girl had to blush at this, for it was true.

"The little old spinster is as sweet and lovable a person as I have met in a story for a long time. But your portrayal of the young man does not suit me. You have tried to cover up his blemishes—have tried to smooth over that crudeness of youth which must naturally be his.

"Don't make the mistake of doing that, my friend," said Mr. Van Weir, earnestly. "Take the story back and write about *Cartling* just what is in your heart—don't try to save *my* face," and he laughed good-humoredly.

"If need be, show your story to some other editor; but don't spoil it, whatever you do. I'd like the first whack at it. I believe it will be a corking good story. But don't be afraid to tell the truth about any of your characters."

This criticism Natalie took to heart. She saw she had been foolish in keeping out of her story certain things which it needed, but which seemed unfavorable to the character of *Cartling*.

She had to admit that this character was suggested by Harvey Van Weir himself. She had yet to learn that the trade of writing demands, first of all, *truth*.

Natalie considered that she never *had* met a young man with so many engaging qualities. And he so encouraged her, and made her see his perfect honesty of opinion, that she went home and put back into the story the very sidelights upon *Cartling's* character which she had feared would offend Mr. Van Weir.

She mailed him the story, then, having had it typed by a girl she knew in Burlingboro, who had a machine. To her delight, when check-day came around the next week, in addition to her regular fifteen-dollar stipend was a check for thirty-five dollars for "Partners in Crime."

And this unexpected sum was indeed gladly received by the oldest of four. On the strength of

it she immediately hired a typewriter and began to study the intricacies of that trade, soon learning that application and a fairly good education were all that were really necessary to the mastering of it.

She had heretofore, when in the *Banner* office, learned the printer's case. This knowledge, to a degree, helped her to grasp the principles of typewriting. In three weeks she was writing at a fair speed with commendable accuracy.

It was about this time that she was able to write "Finis" after the last paragraph of "Her Way Out." And she had already begun the copying of this, her first really important piece of literary work.

But nobody but Mr. Franklin knew that she had written a book; she did not tell her sisters, nor breathe a word of it to Mr. Van Weir.

The typing of the long story took a good deal of her time during the next month. She squeezed out money for another month's hire of the machine, and began to type all the manuscripts she sent out.

Immediately she sold another little sketch, and she laid that check aside to pay for the typewriter for a third month.

She had consulted with Mr. Franklin about the submission of "Her Way Out" to a publisher,

and the editor of the *Banner* selected the house to which she first sent the story for reading.

Then, all she had to do about her book was to wait.

And waiting is very serious work indeed. If Natalie had been obliged to sit down and fold her hands while she was waiting, the uncertainty of the publishers' decision would have quite shaken her.

But Natalie's hands, or her brain, were never idle these days. Jim Hurley came occasionally to take her to drive in his auto; but usually Natalie refused and Laura went instead. Despite his crippled legs Jim had the levers and pedals of the auto rigged so that he could handle the machine, and he was a careful driver.

"You're always busy, Nat," he complained. "Don't you ever take time between spells of work to even breathe?"

"Well, my lung-action seems to be all right, Jimmy-boy," she returned, laughing at him. "But most generally I *am* a little busy bee."

"I thought when you got away from that horrid store that you'd be more like our old Natalie," complained the youth. "All the fellows are wondering what has become of you since graduation, and the girls say you won't even return their calls."

"What do you think, Jim?" she returned, a

little sadly. "Do you think any of them would have time for tennis parties and teas if they were in my place? There are the girls and mother to look after, and the house; and then comes my regular work on the mag.—and the extra work I try to do. What do you think, Jimmy-boy?"

"You work too hard," he said, wistfully. "I —I wish you wouldn't, Nat. I—wish you'd let me help you."

"No, no, Jim!" she cried. "That couldn't be. I have learned the way to independence, and—*I love it!*"

But sometimes, Natalie had to admit to herself, this independent path she traveled was pretty hard.

It was a hard winter. Coal was dear, and so were provisions, and it did seem as though all their clothing wore out very much faster than it used to.

"Of course, that's because I never had to think about such things before," Natalie told herself. "Poor mother and father did the worrying in those days. And here Laura declares she hasn't a frock fit to wear to Jim Hurley's birthday party next month."

And that was a serious matter. They could not neglect Jim by not appearing at his annual party. The Hurley house was, on those occa-

sions, turned upside down for the pleasure of the crippled youth and his friends.

Jim had elected not to go to college; but he was studying engineering, and had a private tutor in languages and another in higher mathematics. Jim was always hoping that perhaps the doctors were wrong when they had told him that his case was incurable.

"And when I can hop around like other fellows, and throw these hydroplanes away," the cheery boy declared, "I want to be ready to strike right out into some important work. I'll keep my brain alive, if my feet *are* dead."

There never *was* a boy like Jim before—so both Natalie and Laura thought.

"And if we didn't come to his party he'd never forgive us," the younger girl said. "But we can't go in rags."

"Not unless he makes it a masquerade party," returned Natalie, laughing softly. "That would help us out a lot, Laura."

"And you must have something new yourself, Nat. Your old frock is right-down shabby. And so is your street dress. I'd be ashamed to go over to New York in that dress you wear. What do you suppose that editor-man, you tell about, thinks of you when you look so poverty-stricken?"

"I really do not know," said the oldest of four, calmly.

Yet she turned aside quickly, and changed the subject, too. She found herself blushing over Laura's question. What *did* Mr. Van Weir really think of her, anyway?

No! the problem of dress could be ignored no longer. Nor could Natalie buy materials and make up the frocks for Laura and herself. Her mother had used to do that when they were smaller; and of late she had had a woman in by the day to cut and fit.

But Natalie dared not even take the responsibility of this last arrangement upon her hands. She knew very little about the needle. It seemed as though she had been so busy the last few years at her books, and with her schoolmates, that she had learned very few domestic things.

Why, Laura was a better cook than she was! The younger sister had a natural aptitude for culinary work, and Natalie was glad when Laura would relieve her of this end of the domestic problem on Saturday and Sunday.

Natalie figured, and puzzled, and did the sum over and over again. Laura must have a new dress for evening wear. If *she* went to Jim's party, Natalie must likewise have something new. In addition, a tailor-made frock of modern style

must replace the one that she realized was quite as shabby as Laura had pointed out.

Fifty dollars! That was the least sum that these three dresses would cost.

"And where in the world am I going to find fifty dollars?" mused Natalie. "Rolling up hill with my name on it? Quite as likely as any way," and she sighed most lugubriously.

Meanwhile her work on *Our Twentieth Century Home* had steadily improved in quality—at least, so Mr. Van Weir assured her—and the children's department was firmly established in the regard of the subscribers.

Natalie loved the work. She put the very brightest things she could find, or invent, into the pages under her care; and the naïve little letters she received from the "kiddies" were a continual source of delight to her.

Rose and Lucille were her critics in this work. Nothing did she put into her pages, or submit to Mr. Van Weir's approval, which the little girls had not passed upon. Their knowledge of what they liked and what they did not like was unerring.

Her trips to New York and to the editorial offices of the magazine were the most enjoyable times—socially—that Natalie had experienced since graduation. She became acquainted with

other girls who worked on *Our Twentieth Century Home*—some in associate editorial capacities like herself, some working in the business offices, stenographers and the like, and with two or three ladies of more mature literary experience.

Mr. Van Weir was the cause of her knowing these interesting people. He made no show of giving her special attention when she came in; yet he always seemed to have ample time for her, and he was interested in her personal affairs as well as in her department.

Having taken the editor into her confidence regarding the financial state in which her father's disappearance had placed her, and of her trouble with Favor & Murch, Natalie had naturally given Mr. Van Weir the right to speak again of these matters and show interest in them.

Once or twice he had asked her if she had heard anything further from Mr. Murch.

"I don't believe I want to hear from him again —or ever see him!" declared Natalie. "I *would* be glad to see old Mr. Favor if he gets well enough to attend to business again. You sée, father must have taken *some* few orders during his last trip, and if those orders have been filled his commissions should be paid."

"Yes," said Mr. Van Weir, dryly, "that is what I was thinking of. That Murch acted so meanly

to you that it strikes me he might be even meaner."

"Meaner?" cried Natalie. "Why! He couldn't be."

"Well, he could hold up your father's commissions without your being aware of it—isn't that so?" demanded the editor.

"Why——"

"Now, Miss Natalie, if your father thought to send his money to his family, wouldn't he have thought to send his orders to his firm? I have been studying over it. If it was only his family he thought of, why ask that Mr. Middler to deliver his wallet to Favor & Murch instead of directly to your mother?"

"Oh, Mr. Van Weir!" cried Natalie, with clasped hands. "Do you suppose that is possible?"

"Quite; and probable, too," he replied, with a little smile. "I can see no real reason for Mr. Murch hiding the fact that he had that small sum of money belonging to you in his possession, unless there was some greater villainy connected with it.

"It looks to me as though he did not want anybody to know that the firm had heard from your father at all. Isn't that so?"

Natalie nodded.

"I'd like to know just how to get at that fellow," growled Mr. Van Weir, reflectively, and his words aroused in the girl's mind the thought of the fifty dollars she needed so badly for her own and Laura's frocks.

But she said nothing more. She could see no way to reach Mr. Murch, and the thought that the merchant was robbing them when the family needed money so much was not a pleasant one.

Once Mr. Van Weir invited Natalie to come into town early and go with him to a matinée concert at Carnegie Hall.

"And we will find a sure-enough chaperon," he said, smiling. "We'll ask Miss Jarrold to go." (Miss Jarrold was one of the magazine's contributors who had already made a name for herself in the literary world, and whom Natalie had met several times in the offices.) "I can get three tickets."

But Natalie had to refuse. Not that she did not long to go—and with Mr. Van Weir, too! But she remembered her shabby best, and was too proud to attend the concert in such poor state.

She knew Mr. Van Weir was disappointed by her refusal; but he was just as nice and friendly with her the next time she went in. Perhaps he suspected what was at the root of her refusal.

The holidays were over now. They celebrated

New Year's Day at the Raymond cottage by helping Mrs. Raymond downstairs for the first time since she had taken to her bed away back in June.

But the poor lady was far from well. Dr. Protest forbade any domestic activities, although he allowed her to be driven out once or twice in Jim Hurley's automobile. On those occasions Natalie went with her, and Jim drove very carefully.

The girls were thankful, however, that "Mummy-kins" had improved even to this degree. She was not to be worried by any domestic matters, however, and whenever she began to talk about their situation and how hard it was for Natalie and Laura the former, at least, vetoed further conversation.

"Let your big girl alone; she'll attend to all that, Mother," declared Natalie, with a confidence that much belied—sometimes—the secret feeling in her heart.

For, as time went on, Natalie's responsibilities seemed to increase instead of growing lighter. She managed to hide her troubles from the invalid and—for the most part—from the smaller girls.

But one day—early in January—there came a sudden and unexpected break in the monotony of their existence.

Natalie was hard at work upon another short story; she hoped that in this way she might obtain the money for the new frocks. She heard the front door bell ring, and she ran and closed her mother's door that she might not be disturbed by the voice of any visitor.

A gentleman was standing upon the step—a dark, tall man, with rather a foreign look—a total stranger to Natalie.

"This is Miss Raymond?" he asked, eyeing her with evident approval, and smiling in a way that made his rather saturnine face suddenly attractive.

"Yes, sir," replied the girl.

"You—you are Mr. Frank Raymond's daughter?"

At the mention of her father, how Natalie's heart leaped! She could only nod, for her lips were all a-tremble.

"Can I come in, Miss Raymond?" he asked. "I am George Orton, from New Orleans. And I have something here that belonged to your father," and Natalie saw that he carried a package under his arm.

CHAPTER XX

IS THIS DIRECT EVIDENCE?

WHEN a dear one dies and we lay that one under the sod, knowing where that bodily presence which we loved really is, the heart rebounds the quicker from the pressure of natural grief.

But when this loved one disappears, there being an uncertainty as to his grave and the means of his death, and, indeed, whether death has occurred or not, the mind of the mourning friend does not so soon settle to the fact that the missing one really *is* dead.

It was so with Natalie Raymond. All the circumstances of the wreck of the *Sakonnet* and her father's disappearance pointed to his loss by drowning at that time. She told herself this almost every day.

Yet her mind could not "settle to it." And every little incident that arose, touching upon Mr. Raymond, brought the thought eagerly clamoring to the door of her mind: *"Is he really dead?"*

It was because of this that the girl, facing the gentleman from New Orleans, could neither speak nor move for fully a minute.

She knew that this must be the man Patsy Hackett had written about—the gentleman the Irish lad worked for down in New Orleans. She remembered in a flash the meagre details of this stranger's adventure with his little daughter when the *Sakonnet* sank.

And she was sure that the package under his arm contained her father's coat, which he had hastily removed and wrapped around the shivering little girl just before she was taken, with her father, into the first officer's boat.

Yet, despite these facts that she positively *knew,* Natalie could not crowd down the hope that in some way Mr. Orton's visit would reveal something more definite regarding her father's disappearance.

"Come—come in," she whispered at last, opening the door wider, and then ushered the gentleman into their little parlor, and closed the door that no sound of their voices should penetrate to the invalid's room above.

"Your mother?" Mr. Orton asked, quickly, and looking quite steadily at the girl.

"She has only been downstairs once or twice since father—father——"

"As ill as *that?*" gasped the visitor.

"Yes, sir. The—the wreck quite broke her

up. She was none too strong before. And now she is quite an invalid."

"Too bad! too bad!" observed the visitor.

"But she is slowly getting better. If she has no set-back."

"And she is too ill to be seen?"

"Oh, I wouldn't have you see her for the world!" cried Natalie, under her breath.

"And you are the oldest?"

"The oldest of four," said Natalie, more confidently. "I have had to take the lead in things."

"Then you are Natalie?" said Mr. Orton, suddenly.

"Yes, sir."

He took her hand again and looked at her steadily. "Your father had great confidence in you, Natalie," he said, softly.

"Oh, sir! don't talk that way about father. If you do I shall break down. And I don't want to," returned Natalie, bravely, "for I want you to tell me all you can about father, and—and how he was lost."

"My dear girl," said the gentleman, sadly, sitting down beside her on the couch. "I could not possibly do that, I fear. We left the steamer before he did—if he left it at all."

"Oh, surely!" cried Natalie, "that captain

would not have deserted the *Sakonnet* while a single passenger remained aboard?"

"Captain Joyce never would have done so had he known one remained—no, indeed."

"Then, I don't see how father could have been left?"

"Nor do I," declared Mr. Orton. "But I do not see how he could have been drowned, either."

"We—we think he must have been lost out of that number that took the boats and rafts, and were finally picked up by the *Eldorado*—the ship that went to Argentine."

"And that *may* be so, but I doubt it," declared the man from New Orleans, shaking his head.

"Why, sir, do you doubt it?"

"Those people clamored for boats and climbed into them as soon as they were pronounced fit for service. It was a fact that the boats of the *Sakonnet* were not in first-class condition.

"Now, the people who were saved by that tramp steamship, the *Eldorado,* got off soon after the mate's boat in which Marjorie and I were taken to the *Pancoast.* It was about dark.

"There were passengers still remaining upon the sinking ship, and you may safely believe, Natalie, that your father did not trust himself with that panic-stricken crowd that almost threw

themselves into the sea when they saw the *Naida* sail away, and the tramp steamer pushing her nose toward them.

"No. Mr. Harris, the purser, took twenty-three passengers into his boat, and that was much later. Your father might have been among that number——"

"Oh, no, sir; Mr. Harris was picked up by a Boston-bound boat and all the passengers with him were accounted for. Two or three of his crew were hurt and went to hospital there. No chance there, sir."

"Well! it was a strange and inexplicable affair," sighed Mr. Orton. "Your father was one of the bravest and kindliest men I ever met. His last act for my little daughter when we went over the side showed the kind of man he was."

He began unwrapping the bundle which lay upon his knees.

"Here is your father's coat, Miss Raymond. There were only a few letters and a little business diary in it. I have waited to bring them to you myself and to tell you that we revere your father's memory in our house as though he were one of our closest and dearest friends."

"Thank you, sir," replied Natalie, softly, and received and smoothed out the wide-shouldered blue coat which she so well remembered.

The letters were of no particular importance, and Natalie never remembered having seen the little red morocco-covered diary before. But her father's handwriting was in it.

She liked Mr. Orton for more reasons than the single one that he praised her father's character. The gentleman sat beside her and won all her story from her—her struggles to "make both ends meet" until she had obtained her regular work with the magazine, as well as her present and pressing difficulties.

She excused herself long enough to get luncheon, and made him stay to partake of it, little Lucille entertaining him during the interim. When Laura and Rose came home from school for the mid-day meal they liked the man from New Orleans, too.

The visitor was one who made friends easily. Rose was about the age of his little daughter. He had not brought her with him this time; but he promised that in the summer when he came North again she would have the pleasure of meeting the Raymond girls.

Mr. Orton was in the suit and cloak trade, having a retail store in New Orleans, and he came North twice a year to buy goods. When he went away after luncheon he carried with him the remembrance of a well kept house, a cheerful

family of girls, and at their head a most capable and plucky young woman.

"She's splendid," he thought. "Frank Raymond might well have been proud of her—although he did not look forward, poor fellow, to any time that she would have to mother those other girls, take care of the invalid upstairs, and run the household on her own tiny income."

Natalie dared tell Mrs. Raymond nothing about this visit. None of the four—even little Lucille—spoke of their father in Mrs. Raymond's presence if they could help it.

The lady seemed to have made up her mind, right at first, that her husband would never return. She had never, even in the first few days following the wreck of the *Sakonnet,* said a hopeful word.

And, as the doctor had said, perhaps it was as well that she was not looking forward to Mr. Raymond's possible return.

Natalie hid the blue coat away where she knew her mother would never find it. The letters she read and destroyed; they were of no importance. But the little business diary she locked in her own table drawer.

After all the others were abed that night she took it out and began to run idly through the

little book. And yet, not wholly in an idle mood; she was curious.

What Mr. Van Weir had said regarding Murch's possible villainy had stuck in Natalie's mind. She wished that she could have seen Mr. Middler, or his secretary again and learned the exact contents of her father's wallet beside the twenty-seven dollars.

But Mr Middler and his family, she now knew, were traveling somewhere in Europe. She could not reach even the secretary to learn just what Mr. Murch had signed for when he received her father's wallet.

In writing home while on his business trips, her father seldom said much about the orders he was taking. That wasn't his way. His letters—those which the girls saw, at least—were usually funny, or descriptive. Mr. Raymond was not a man who troubled his family about his business affairs.

Therefore neither Natalie, nor her mother really knew whether he had done well or not on the southern trip which had resulted so disastrously for them all.

The little red-covered book began with the first of January. On some pages there was little jotted down. Sometimes a mere comment on the weather, or a few figures denoting some ex-

penditures of the traveling man, or two or three items pointing to purchases which he was to make for Mrs. Raymond when he ran in to New York.

Finally Natalie came to the time when her father had started South. She traced him by the jotting down of hotel expenses through the various states until he had reached New Orleans and sailed from that port for Jamaica.

And every few days she noted initials and sums of money jotted down like the following:

"Burmingham B. & C. Co.—$705.30."

"Iscaria—Gregg & Co.—$332."

"Nota Dame—F. & L.—$1,221."

On the pages devoted to the days he remained in the larger cities, like New Orleans, several such items were noted. Natalie believed these referred to sales he had made.

These orders must have either been mailed to his firm before he left the United States for Jamaica, or they were orders to be delivered so far ahead that Mr. Raymond retained them in his own order book, to be filled when he got back from his completed trip.

As Mr. Favor had said nothing regarding having received orders from her father, when he paid Natalie Mr. Raymond's salary, the girl believed that every order her father had written on

his trip had been reserved by him for his home-coming.

Now, as Mr. Van Weir had said, would he not have thought to send these orders to his firm, when he had sent the wallet? It looked reasonable.

And as Natalie ran through the little red-covered diary, she saw item after item written down in the same manner as those above, the sums aggregating an order list which, if filled by Favor & Murch, would certainly have brought their traveling representative a splendid commission.

It was not hard to believe Mr. Murch a villain after the way he had already treated her. And the discovery of the listed orders in this little book, Natalie believed, was important.

But what could she do about it? To whom should she go for advice?

And even if the items in this diary could be considered direct evidence of Mr. Murch's dishonesty, as well as of Mr. Raymond's success as the firm's representative, how could her suspicions be corroborated?

There might be a large sum of money owing to her father by the firm of Favor & Murch. But how to prove that fact was the question.

CHAPTER XXI

THE ANGEL'S GIFT

MONEY the Raymonds had to have.

Natalie awoke every morning with *that* as a daybreak thought. And it was not a pleasant one. For fifteen dollars per week had seemed such a windfall when it had first begun; but she had not realized at that time that all through the summer they had been running behind.

Not that they were much in debt at this present time—January. But the money she received from *Our Twentieth Century Home* was really eaten up by their daily expenses. And, as we have seen (and as was natural), their wardrobe had been steadily wearing out.

"Every time Jim says anything about his party, I feel like sinking through the ground," said Laura, with a sigh, one evening. "You know very well, Natalie, we can't go."

"Let's be honest and tell him so," suggested Natalie, with more boldness than she really felt.

"Maybe *you* can; you haven't treated poor Jim right anyway," snapped Laura.

"Why, how do you mean? Why haven't I

treated him right?" demanded the oldest of the four.

"You know without my telling you," sniffed Laura.

"I *don't* know," said her sister, firmly. "And I don't like what you have said a bit, Laura."

"I suppose I am wicked," returned Laura, contritely, "but I wonder why you seem so pleased that we're not in debt, when we need and want dozens and dozens of things! I guess we could get some of them if we went into debt a very little way."

"We could indeed," admitted Natalie, slowly.

"And why not go into debt for a decent dress apiece? Oh, Nat! I shall be ashamed to death if we can't go to Jim's party—and what will he say?"

"We'd better tell him the truth."

"No! Oh, no! It's perfectly awful to be poor," cried Laura. "But it's infinitely worse to have folks *know* that you are poor."

"Don't you suppose our old friends must know that we're having a hard time to get along?" queried Natalie.

"No. They think father left some life insurance, or something. And they think that you are earning a lot of money, I expect. Bob Granger said he read that first story of yours

in the *Home* and he thinks that they pay you two or three hundred dollars for a story like that."

"My goodness me! I wish they did," exclaimed Natalie.

"Well, I didn't disabuse his mind," said Laura, complacently. "I don't like those Grangers, anyway. I believe that Mrs. Granger has been talking about you, too."

Natalie said nothing; but she was very glad in her heart that Mrs. Granger's gold-mesh bag had been found before she left Kester & Baum's employ.

These days, too, the postman never sounded his whistle in their block that Natalie's heart did not jump. She left whatever she was engaged with and scurried to the door, for she was hoping to hear from the book.

As the days passed and no word came about "Her Way Out" Natalie became very despondent. All hope that it would be taken immediately and "advanced royalties" offered her, soon fled away.

No. To be more practical, the chance was utterly ridiculous that from the book she might get some immediate returns so that Laura and herself could buy new frocks in time for Jim Hurley's party.

She had had no other bright idea for a short story. The work she furnished to the magazine weekly had become a "grind"; it was no longer spontaneous and therefore was harder to write. No little sketches were sold about this time to encourage her, either.

Indeed, Natalie was in a veritable Slough of Despond one day when she started for New York on her usual weekly visit to the offices of *Our Twentieth Century Home.*

The possibility that Mr. Murch was cheating them, and that there were commissions due to their father, troubled Natalie's mind exceedingly. There might be several hundred dollars due on their father's account—and such a sum would be the difference for them between pinching poverty and comparative affluence.

As she put her manuscript in her bag she saw the little red book, and she popped that in, too. Yet she was by no means convinced that she would show her father's diary to Mr. Van Weir.

Why should she? How could she expect the editor of the magazine to be so deeply interested in her affairs? Besides, Mr. Van Weir did not seem to be just the person to help her in this matter.

And, while she walked to the station, turning over and over in her mind these thoughts, the

very person who *had* helped her with Mr. Murch before crossed her path.

She had seen the detective several times since Mr. Murch had been brought to book; but the man had never presumed upon his acquaintance with her. She knew his name was Peter Darby, and that he had been for four or five years on the Burlingboro police force. Aside from that she knew nothing about him.

Yet perhaps the remembrance of what he had done for her with Mr. Murch lent a more friendly expression to her face when she bowed and smiled at Mr. Darby on this occasion.

At least, he sidled along toward her as she stood upon the platform waiting for the train.

"You go to town, I notice, pretty reg'lar, Miss?" said Darby.

"Yes. I have to go at least once a week to the office."

"So somebody was tellin' me—that you worked for a magazine, eh?"

"Yes, Mr. Darby," said Natalie, smiling.

"Well!" breathed the detective. "I told 'em you were a mighty smart girl. 'Scuse me, Ma'am; I didn't mean to be fresh."

"That's all right, Mr. Darby," Natalie responded. "I have only gratitude for you."

"Shucks! That wasn't anything," grumbled

the detective. "Say! did that man, Murch, ever run across you again?"

"No. But I almost wish he would," Natalie said, impulsively.

"How's that, Miss?"

Just then the train came into view. Natalie made a quick decision.

"If you'll ride with me, Mr. Darby, I'll tell you what I mean," she said.

"Indeed I will!" observed Mr. Darby, with alacrity, and he helped her aboard and took the seat by her side.

Natalie had reason to know that the detective had her interests at heart and she had determined, on the instant, to take him into her confidence regarding the little red book.

The moment she broached the subject of her father's connection with the firm of Favor & Murch Mr. Darby looked interested. And when she told of the little diary that had come into her hands, and how it had reached her, the young man looked exceedingly pleased.

"I see! I see!" he observed. "It's just the thing I've been looking for—that's right!"

"Just what *you* have been looking for?" repeated Natalie, in amazement.

"That's it, Ma'am," said Mr. Darby. "When I'm puzzled about a thing I can't let go of it till

I see the reason for it. I want to see what makes the wheels go 'round," and he laughed.

"I see," returned Natalie, nodding.

"That's what got me my plainclothes job," explained the young man. "When I poke my nose into anything I keep on till I smell out all there is to know about it. Now! This Murch struck me as being as crooked as a corkscrew."

"Oh!"

"And he wasn't holding out that wallet for twenty-seven dollars—not much!"

"That—that is what another of my friends says," admitted Natalie.

"And he's right," agreed Mr. Darby. "He's right. So am I right. This little book tells me so. Will you let me have it for a while, Miss?"

"Yes, indeed, Mr. Darby," said the young girl, without hesitation.

"You leave it to me. I know lawyers, and those that are even bigger than lawyers. It looks like a plain case to me, so it does. Murch got hold of all the orders your father took while he was away on that trip, and the firm has filled 'em without giving your father credit for his commissions. Why!" exclaimed Mr. Darby, "if we can get in the evidence of this little red book there ought to be five hundred dollars, and more, coming to you, Miss."

"I know it! I know it!" cried Natalie. "Do you suppose it's too good to be true?"

"Huh! nothing is too good to be true for *you*, Miss," replied Pete Darby, with enthusiasm.

After they had separated at the end of the ride Natalie had a reversal of feeling. If old Mr. Favor came home and was well enough to attend to business again, how badly he would feel if he learned of his partner's meanness. And Mr. Favor had been very kind to her.

"But we need the money so!" Natalie told herself. "Why, five hundred dollars would be just like a fortune to us."

All these possibilities for "money in the lump," however, seemed far, far in the future. And it was right now that Natalie Raymond needed cash so much.

She was really ashamed of her old suit when she went into Mr. Van Weir's office. Her coat was old, too, but in better condition and hid the dress. She would not remove the coat all the time she was in the offices.

And again she had to refuse an invitation of the editor—and one that she very much wished to accept.

"Miss Jarrold is going to have a house-warming," he said. "You know, she's got a studio up the Avenue. And she told me to be sure and

bring you. If you have a friend out there in Burlingboro, bring her in with you and I'll see you both home."

Natalie was very desirous of meeting the sort of people whom she knew would be at Miss Jarrold's party; but how could she go in her old clothes?

This social dissipation seemed just as far beyond her as was Jim Hurley's birthday celebration. She had to refuse Mr. Van Weir very firmly, and that young man really looked disappointed.

"I hope you'll go somewhere some time with me besides a quick-lunch restaurant," he said, a little plaintively.

But Natalie could not respond with a laugh, as usual. She was too ashamed and hurt by her poverty. It was grinding the girl hard, these days!

She went home that evening feeling more dispirited and "wilted" than she had ever felt when she was working behind the notion counter at Kester & Baum's.

The sitting-room was all alight when she came in sight of the cottage—and that was not usual. Natalie, seeing flitting shadows against the shades, hurried her steps.

She went in at the kitchen door and found the

room deserted, with supper set back upon the stove and just a suspicion of a burning odor coming from the pots. Before the other girls knew she had come, she was playing "Fireman, Save My Child."

"Never mind about those old pots and pans, Nat!" screamed Laura, rushing in. "The most wonderful thing has happened."

"Well, your burning the supper isn't the most wonderful thing, that's sure," declared the oldest of four. "It's happened too frequently."

"Croaker!" returned Laura, and darted back into the sitting-room.

"You better come, Sister," said Rose, her eyes big with wonder, while Lucille tugged at her oldest sister's dress and jumped up and down with impatience.

"What is it?" asked Natalie, walking calmly into the room.

And then her calmness left her—and almost her breath as well! There, spread upon the couch, upon the centre-table, and over the chairs, were—it seemed to her—enough frocks, evidently of suitable sizes for all four of them, to stock a small store!

"Where—where did they come from?" Natalie gasped, clinging to a chair to hold herself upright.

"Angel's gift! Angel's gift!" cried Laura.

"*Did* angels send them, Sister?" asked Lucille, awestruck.

"He was an angel in a blue suit and with a cap on," declared Rose, who had even scoffed at the idea of Santa Claus for the past two Christmases.

"By express?" demanded Natalie.

"That's what," said Laura, slangily.

"But, from whom?"

"Now you've asked me a hard one," said Laura, shaking her head. "No address on the parcel expect Mummy-kins's. And whoever sent 'em knows both our needs and our sizes. There are frocks for all—and the dearest little evening gown for *me*—wait till you see it. And one for you—quite grown up, Miss Natalie Raymond. And a coat apiece all round——

"Why, Nat Raymond! We can go to Jim Hurley's birthday party now, all right, all right!"

CHAPTER XXII

MISS JARROLD'S PARTY

NATALIE hustled the little brood in to the supper table and refused for the time being to be further enthused by the wonderful gift from the skies.

For such Laura believed it must be. Nobody who had not more than human wisdom and understanding, it would seem, could have picked out those frocks and coats with such judgment.

The greatest needs in the line of clothing of all four sisters were amply supplied. And not alone were the garments suitable, but they were pretty and quite in the mode.

"There won't be a girl at school any better dressed than I shall be at last, thank goodness!" exclaimed Laura, with an ecstatic sigh.

Natalie would not agree, however. As the evening meal progressed, she grew more and more silent and thoughtful.

"Instead of being gladder, Natalie isn't cheerful at all!" declared Rose, at length.

"For pity's sake! what's the matter with you,

Nat?" demanded Laura, exasperated. "Rose is right. You're as glum as can be."

"I'm not glum," denied the oldest of the four.

"What are you, then?"

"I'm just wondering," returned Natalie, slowly.

"Well, it certainly does hurt you to wonder. Don't do it. Be thankful for what has been sent to us——"

"That's just it, Laura," said Natalie, gravely. "I can't. I'm not sure that it is right for us to accept these things——"

"Oh, oh!" shrieked Laura. "Don't let me hear you say anything about sending them back."

"Where would we send them?"

"That's it!" cried Laura. "We don't know. Why try to find out? It would be ridiculous. The garments were meant for us. They were addressed to mother——"

"But, do you notice there isn't a label on the frocks, or coats. There is no way, it seems, to trace out our benefactor. I—I don't like it. Laura."

"Natalie Raymond! Are you crazy?" demanded Laura. "Would you refuse to accept these perfectly lovely clothes?"

"I—don't—know."

"Well, thank goodness! you can't refuse. Just as you say, we don't know who the sender is."

"But we don't have to wear them."

"There! now I know you *are* crazy," declared Laura, shaking her head in despair. "It would be like refusing to accept assistance from a person on shore if you were drowning. I expect you'd want to be introduced to the rescuer before accepting his assistance—eh?"

But Natalie would not commit herself for the time being. She felt as though she must think the thing over. Indeed, she wished heartily that she could discuss it with her mother.

But it would never do to take the invalid into their confidence. Whenever Mrs. Raymond began talking about domestic difficulties, or their poverty, Natalie had laughed her out of the idea.

"You don't have confidence enough in your daughters, dear," she had said. "There never *were* such girls as we are."

"I believe it—oh, I believe it," had replied Mrs. Raymond, thankfully. "And you are the most wonderful of all. To think of your supporting this whole family by writing!"

For Natalie had allowed her mother to think that the salary she received from *Our Twentieth Century Home* was ample for all their needs.

The invalid had, however, begun to notice and comment upon the girls' shabbiness. Her eyes were quick to see that neither Natalie nor Laura appeared in new frocks.

And here the much needed garments were at hand. They were no cast-off, second-hand clothes; but were fresh from the shops, even if they boasted no labels.

This last fact made Natalie think twice. Who could so easily obtain garments like these from the wholesale shops, before the retail labels were sewed on, but Mr. George Orton, the man from New Orleans?

Almost at once she had thought of him as the donor of the clothing. And he was in the business, and undoubtedly had a quick eye in judging sizes and the suitableness of garments.

It was true he had seen the four girls for only a single hour; yet he had fitted them as to size (if he *was* the unknown friend) as closely as though he had known them all their lives.

Yes, Natalie could see no other answer to this mystery. Mr. Orton, holding their father in such kind remembrance, had sent them these frocks and coats. And it would take but little work to make every one of them fit perfectly.

They could have in Miss Twist for a couple of

days, and she would be able to do in that time all that was necessary.

Laura did not even ask who the benefactor might be after the first surprise was past. But Natalie pointed out to her that it must be Mr. Orton.

"Well, I knew he was a nice man; but I didn't know he was *so* nice," replied Laura, carelessly.

"But should we take them from him?"

"Oh, bother! You're not going to pry me loose from this party dress," declared Laura, holding it close to her. "I'm going to Jim's party—and so are you."

But as it chanced something before Jim Hurley's party brought Natalie finally to the fateful decision.

It was the day after the mysterious express package had come to the Raymond cottage, and Mrs. Hackett was over to see "the purty things," and exclaiming over their beauties, when the postman brought Natalie a letter.

It was not the long-looked-for one from the publishers who had Natalie's book under consideration; but the girl opened it with much curiosity, as it was addressed in a hand which she did not recognize.

To her amazement, Natalie found it was from Miss Jarrold. The note read:

Nookside, Fifth Avenue,
New York City,
January the Seventeenth.

Dear Miss Raymond:

I have set my heart upon having all the *Home* people to my "house warming party," and I don't want you to be the only one absent. Let Mr. Van Weir bring you—do; and your chaperon will be heartily welcome, too. I shall be keenly disappointed if you do not come, and can accept no excuse less than a physician's certificate.

Sincerely,
ALICIA JARROLD.

"And just think!" ejaculated Laura, reading over her sister's shoulder, "she's the 'Alicia Jarrold' who has written books and whose stories are in the big magazines. Why, Nat! what a hit you've made with those folks over there in New York."

"Sure, and dooes she re'lly live on Fift' Av'noo?" gasped Mrs. Hackett.

"That is where she has just engaged a studio apartment," said Natalie, nodding.

"And what *be* thim studios, now? Do they cook an' ate in thim?" demanded Mrs. Hackett.

"They have kitchenettes," said Laura, quickly, and grinning. "And their stoves are just big

enough to *stew* on, but not to bake and roast. Therefore the name, 'studio.'"

"Behave, Laura!" admonished Natalie, but smiling withal.

"'Tis a very foine neighborhood, I've no doubt," declared Mrs. Hackett. "I had a brother—God rist his sowl!—who was coachman for a fam'ly what lived on the Av'noo. Sure, they ate off'n goold dishes, an' there warn't wan of the fam'ly—ne'er man nor woman—that could dress themselves."

"What was the matter with them?" demanded Laura, startled. "Were they all cripples?"

"No. Only rich," explained Mrs. Hackett, wagging her head. "It dooes beat all how little some av these rich people is taught to do. Iv'ry wan of thim in that fam'ly, me brother Mike said, had aither a maid or a man to driss thim. The poor, helpless crathures!"

"Well! it must be nice to be rich, just the same," sighed Laura, holding up her "party" dress to a better light. "Thank goodness, Nat! you can go to Miss Jarrold's party."

"Oh, I don't know," said Natalie, in a worried tone. "I have refused once."

"Refused!" gasped her sister.

"Yes. Mr. Van Weir asked me and I told him I could not go."

"Well, you couldn't—until these came," said Laura, pointing to the heap of new dresses.

"But—but I am not sure it would be right. I have nobody to go with——"

"Thought you said Mr. Van Weir would see after you?" cried Laura. "Miss Jarrold says so, too," and she pounced on the note to read it again.

"But it would not be right for me to go with him *alone* to the party," said Natalie, wisely.

"I—don't—see—why—not," began Laura. Then she cried: "Why! Miss Jarrold says your chaperon will be welcome——"

"And who would I ask to chaperon me?" demanded Natalie, quickly, though half convinced already of the feasibility of the scheme. She *did* want to go so!

"Phat sort of a chap is *this* you do bes wantin', Miss Nat'lie?" demanded Mrs. Hackett, quickly. "Isn't there ne'er a chap that'll beau ye to thim doin's? What's th' matter wid the la-ads—an' you such a purty girl?"

This delighted Laura immensely.

"There's a chap all ready to take her, Mrs. Hackett," she cried. "But who's to go along and watch the chap? That's what 'chaperon' means, Mrs. Hackett: somebody to watch the chap."

"Sure, an' some av thim nade watchin'," returned the good lady, briskly. "But I've as two good eyes as the nixt wan, and if ye want a chaperon, Miss Nat'lie, here am I—take me."

"Goody!" cried Laura, fairly dancing up and down and clapping her hands. "I dare you, Nat!"

She was delighted at the picture of Mrs. Hackett in her best bonnet and shawl appearing in the Fifth Avenue studio in the office of Natalie's friend.

But after all, who would be more suitable? Natalie had not been used to going out much except with her mother, or to the school socials where the teachers played propriety. The Raymonds had no particular friend on whom they could call in this emergency.

And then, Natalie believed that Mrs. Hackett would amuse Mr. Van Weir immensely—especially as a chaperon!

So she immediately sat down and thanked Miss Jarrold for her invitation, and accepted it, and likewise penned a note to the editor of *Our Twentieth Century* reconsidering his offer and telling him at what hour to expect her at the end of the tube on the evening of Miss Jarrold's party.

It was not until she had written and sent both of these notes, however, that Natalie remembered

that she had now, by this act, irrevocably accepted the present of clothing from the mysterious donor!

She could not go to Miss Jarrold's party without wearing the pretty evening dress which almost exactly fitted her. And having accepted the dress for herself she could not refuse to let Laura and the others deck themselves out in the new—and needed—clothing.

"If it is Mr. Orton, I am a thousand times obliged to him," thought the girl, in the end. "But if somebody else has shown us this charity——"

It worried her, and yet the things were so welcome! How could she have refused? Perhaps no other girl of her age and with as little experience of the world as Natalie Raymond possessed, would have done differently. Fine dresses are a great temptation.

The great day came and when Natalie dressed late in the afternoon, with the aid of all three of her sisters, and the oversight of Miss Twist, the seamstress, herself, she was pronounced little less than "a vision of loveliness."

"Dear me, Nat! I wish there was the least chance of me looking as pretty as you do when I'm your age," sighed Laura. "I believe I'll dye my old tow-hair."

"You let me catch you!" said Natalie.

"But it's awful to go around colorless all one's life when there is a brilliantly pretty sister in the family; it isn't fair," declared Laura.

"Beauty is a matter of taste," remarked Natalie. "Now, Ethel Rogers, fat as she is, would be all the rage in China."

"Poor comfort. I'm not even *fat,*" grumbled Laura.

Mrs. Hackett appeared in a shawl of rather brilliant hue and a black bonnet faced with the brightest shade of green known to the canons of art. Laura could scarcely quench the giggles, and whispered to Natalie that she would give anything to see Mr. Van Weir's face when he first caught sight of Mrs. Hackett's gloves and "reticule." Mrs. Hackett did not consider herself completely dressed without this bag of colored beads and fringe that somebody had given her years before.

But Natalie had no foolish pride about her. And she believed that Mr. Van Weir, and Miss Jarrold, and the others whom she expected to meet that evening, were entirely too well bred to remark upon Mrs. Hackett's peculiarities of either dress or manner.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE MAN WHO TOLD A STORY

It was a cold and blustery night and when they left Burlingboro flakes of snow had already begun to fall. Mr. Van Weir met them on the platform of the tube at Thirty-third Street.

"I was afraid, after all, you would not come, Miss Raymond," he said, coming quickly to meet her. "There is a young blizzard raging outside. But I have a taxi waiting and it is not far to Miss Jarrold's place. Oh!"

Mrs. Hackett had come into his range of vision, and he was evidently startled for the moment. Natalie, privately amused, introduced the good lady to the editor with an unmoved face.

"Sure, is this the chap I have to watch, Miss Nat'lie?" whispered Mrs. Hackett.

"Yes."

"Thin he doesn't ra'lly nade it," declared the good woman. "He has a thrustworthy face on him."

Which opinion she imparted later to Mr. Van Weir to that young gentleman's great delight.

The taxi whisked them to Miss Jarrold's

studio. Mrs. Hackett had made up her mind to be impressed with much grandeur. But the studio was in one of those half-made-over old houses on the Avenue; and after she had panted up four flights of stairs to the floor directly under the roof, and taken a glance at the "make-shifts" for home comforts which all such studios contain, the good lady lost her amazement and found her level quickly enough.

"'Tis just a par-r-ty, given be the nice lady in the black driss an' white lace! 'Tis beautiful lace, that same. Why! we might be havin' the same par-rty at home. I'll soon find plinty to do, Miss Nat'lie. Don't ye bother about me."

And she proceeded to tuck up her skirt, and lay aside the fashionable bag, and her gloves, and her bonnet and shawl, and take hold of affairs in the tiny kitchenette with capable hands.

"My dear Miss Raymond!" their hostess confided to Natalie, "you have brought the very nicest chaperon I ever saw. She knows how to do everything, and insists upon doing it, too! She says that Mr. Van Weir doesn't need watching, and that she will feel more comfortable if she is kept busy. I never can thank you enough for bringing Mrs. Hackett."

The people who had assembled were a most

delightful crowd. At least, so Natalie found them.

There were writers, and editors, and artists, and even a few actor-folk; and there were no "wall-flowers." Miss Jarrold termed them "drones."

"Nobody can stay to my party who can't or won't *do* something," she declared. "Either you must sing a song, or speak a piece, or read something, or—or play the jew's-harp! Remember that."

This statement scared Natalie for a bit; then Mr. Van Weir told her he had the proofs of her story, "Partners in Crime" in his pocket (the *Home* was to print it in three weeks, or so) and so, when it came her turn, the young girl read the simple but pathetic little story, and it was rapturously applauded.

Mr. Van Weir gave them a comical bit—whether it was original or not, Natalie did not know. Miss Jarrold read a chapter from her most popular book. One of the stage ladies recited. Several sang. And Mr. Van Weir drew forth Mrs. Hackett from the background, played a lilting Irish air himself on the piano, and made the good-natured lady dance a jig!

"Shure, 'tis not Jenny Hackett that would be sayin' such a foine gintleman 'Nay,'" Mrs.

Hackett, breathless at the end, whispered to Natalie. "Hasn't he the way wid him? Arrah! he's the broth av a bhoy! He may have a Dutch name; but shure, some wan of his forebears was in Ireland, and kissed the Blarney stone."

Suddenly there was a cry for "Mr. Bender! Mr. Bender!" Natalie had been introduced to this gentleman—a slim, nervous, wiry man, with an ugly face, a pleasant voice, and the sharpest eye, she believed, she had ever seen.

"He is trying to escape his just share in the proceedings," cried Miss Jarrold. "What did I tell you?" she demanded, leading the gentleman out before all the company. "You can't 'belong' at this party if you're not willing to do something to entertain."

"But my dear Miss Jarrold," he said, "my will is perfectly good. Only you know I can not sing, recite, or dance. I can't even read either prose or poetry of my own composition, for I never yet succeeded in writing a page that suited me—never one that I dared let go into print."

"That's right! That's right!" groaned Mr. Van Weir. "For a man who has been everywhere, and seen everything, and had adventures galore, this man Bender is a perfectly useless individual from an editorial standpoint. To think!

he can't put some of his ripping stories down on paper."

"But he can tell 'em!" declared Miss Jarrold. "I have heard him."

"Say, Bend!" called a man from the other end of the room. "Let 'em hear part of that yarn you were giving us at dinner to-night. That about when you were wrecked off Hatteras last June——"

Natalie had been talking in a whisper to one of the girls who held some sort of sub-editorial position in the magazine office. She heard this speech as though from a great distance.

But it halted her own tongue. Indeed, it seemed, for the moment, as though she were numbed and helpless, both of speech and action!

The other girl thought she had stopped to listen for Mr. Bender's reply. She said:

"Oh, I hope he talks! Mr. Bender can *tell* stories if he can't write them—and wonderfully interesting ones, too. Just listen."

Natalie did not move; but in a few moments she could hear. She knew that the gentleman had complied with the request and was already launched upon the story:

"I elected to remain and trust to rescue in the captain's boat, and I believe my friend—the man I speak of—would have done the same had he

had his own way about it. I can talk about him, and tell you what he did; wish I could write it.

"I never knew his name. There were upwards of three hundred people aboard the boat besides the crew, and many of them I did not get to know at all. They said there was a multi-millionaire and his wife aboard—this man Middler whom you read so much about in the papers. But those sort of people never interest *me,*" pursued Mr. Bender.

"I'd like to have known this man I speak of. He'd been traveling on business, I believe, through the West Indies—a fleshy, smiling man, with a hearty laugh— Yes! he laughed. I don't know but he was the only person aboard the ship as she plunged, helpless, in the seas off Hatteras that day and evening, who *did* laugh. Oh, he he was a *man!*

"Before ever the first rescuing boats came to our aid—from the New York-bound steamer—he was encouraging the weeping women and children —and some of the male sex, too, that were little better off.

"He fitted countless life-belts for people whose fingers shook so they could not manipulate the buckles themselves. And in the end he had no belt left for himself—and laughed about it.

"I saw him strip his coat from his back and

wrap around a little girl just as she went over the side into the first officer's boat—the boat that was picked up later by the *Pancoast.*

"He worked like a Trojan in getting our own boats and rafts over when the big tramp steamer hove to and signalled for us to send all aboard that could come. And it was when the remainder of the firemen made a rush for one of the rafts—the second mutiny of that awful time—that my friend was hurt——"

Somebody screamed. Van Weir suddenly stood up, demanding:

"What is this you are telling us, Mr. Bender? Not the story of the wreck of the *Sakonnet?*"

"It is—what part I saw of it, Mr. Van Weir," returned Bender.

"I am sorry. Miss Raymond's father was lost in that wreck. She——"

But already Mrs. Hackett was at the unconscious girl's side. She picked her up in her strong arms and strode with the girl into Miss Jarrold's sleeping room.

"Sure, *that* man has no sinse at all, at all, frightening the lamb like this," the good woman declared.

CHAPTER XXIV

JIM'S BIRTHDAY

THE lights were low and everybody but Van Weir had gone when Natalie and her faithful "chaperon" appeared in the large studio room again. It was still snowing fiercely outdoors, but the editor had obtained a carriage to take them to the station. Taxicabs could not run at this hour, for the snow was too deep.

"I will go over to Burlingboro with you and we can surely get a vehicle there, Miss Raymond," Van Weir said.

"Or, if you and Mrs. Hackett will remain with me all night," interposed their hostess. "Surely, you know you are welcome," and she patted the pale young girl's hand.

"You are too good, Miss Jarrold," sighed Natalie. "But I feel that I must go home. My mother is an invalid, you know, and my sisters would be worried to death if I did not return to-night."

"And begorra! I've got a troop of young 'uns to git breakfast for mesilf in the morning," said Mrs. Hackett.

"I have made you trouble enough, I fear," said Natalie. "I broke up your party with my foolishness."

"Not at all, Miss Raymond," declared their hostess. "I am quite sure it was late enough for them to stay—on such a night as this. Now, Mr. Van Weir, you take good care of these ladies. If not—well! Never again shall you have a chance to buy a story of mine!"

"If for no other reason, then, Miss Jarrold, I shall take the best of care of them," said the editor, smiling, and then Natalie went down the long flights on his arm, with Mrs. Hackett close behind, and all three quickly entered the waiting carriage.

"Where is he?" whispered Natalie in Van Weir's ear, when the carriage started.

"Where is who?" returned the editor, in surprise.

"That man."

Van Weir started, staring at her—or trying to—in the dark, while the sleet and snow slatted against the carriage windows.

"Do you mean Bender?" he asked.

"Yes," breathed Natalie.

"He went home like the rest of them."

"You know where he lives, Mr. Van Weir?"

asked the young girl, with clasped hands and shaking voice.

"Oh, I can easily find him for you, Miss Raymond," he said, soothingly.

"Do so—please! Oh, I wish I had not fainted. If I could have heard the rest——"

"You mean the remainder of his story of the wreck?"

"Yes, yes."

"But what good would that have done you, Miss Raymond? He came ashore in the captain's boat. And Mr. Raymond was not in *that* boat, for a certainty."

"But he knows more than anybody else, Mr. Van Weir!" moaned Natalie. "Don't you *see* he does?"

"I fail to catch your point of view," said the editor, slowly.

"Didn't you know that he was talking about my father?" cried the girl. "He did not know his name; but he described him. Father was fleshy, and jolly, and as Mr. Middler said in the *Courier,* he was helping everybody throughout the turmoil and confusion."

"But other men——"

"Yes, I know. He was not the only *man* aboard the *Sakonnet,*" Natalie hastened to say. "But he took off his coat to put around

a little girl who went into the first officer's boat. That was Marjorie Orton. We have the coat. Mr. Orton brought it to us only the other day," Natalie went on eagerly. "And then, this Mr. Bender went farther in the story of the wreck than anybody else."

"How do you mean?"

"He said that my father was hurt. He was hurt keeping back the firemen who broke loose again and tried to steal one of the life-rafts away from the passengers. Didn't you hear?"

"By Jove!" murmured the editor, in wonder.

"He could have told me more," sighed Natalie. "If I hadn't been so foolish as to scream and faint, he *would* have told me more. Oh, Mr. Van Weir! I *must* see that Mr. Bender again."

"And you shall!" cried Harvey Van Weir. "I'll go after him to-morrow—no! this very day, for it's past midnight now. You shall hear all that he has to tell about the wreck, and particularly what he remembers about your father."

"If you will be so kind," pleaded Natalie.

The carriage plowed through the snow at last and reached the station. They got out and hurried to get that 12:40 train which Burlingboro people called "the night owl." Natalie had never been in the city so late before.

Under the river they went, and out over the Jersey flatlands where the huge snow plows were at work, for the storm was raging here quite as heavily as in the city. When the train stopped at Burlingboro all about the station was a white waste, and for a moment Natalie did not see how they were to get home.

But then Old Jonesey and his hack came floundering through the drifts, and Van Weir put the girl and Mrs. Hackett aboard Jonesey's "deep-sea craft" and shouted "Good-bye" after them as the ancient vehicle set sail for the Vesey Street cottage.

"And you'll hear from me as quickly as I can find Mr. Bender," declared the editor, as he closed the carriage door.

He was to catch a train back to town in just seven minutes. Natalie never knew that the train was snow-bound somewhere in the western part of Jersey and that Harvey Van Weir spent nearer seven hours than seven minutes in the Burlingboro station before he could get back to New York.

Natalie could hardly expect to hear from Mr. Van Weir that day. The postman barely got through the snow; but along about night an expressman came to the door of the Raymond cottage.

The girls had not gone to school, and Laura reached the door first.

"More angel's gifts! More angel's gifts!" cried Rose and Lucille.

But it was a small, flat, square package, and it was addressed to Natalie. She took it hastily from Laura, refusing to explain, and locked herself into her own room with it.

For she knew well what it was. Her heart went pit-a-pat when she saw it. She had to wait some few moments before she could cut the string and open the package.

There lay the manuscript of her book—"Her Way Out." The book she had hoped so much from. All through this hard winter she had looked forward to some great advantage to be gained from this book—even before she had sent it to the publisher.

And nothing had come of it. It was returned——

Could it be possible that there was some word of explanation—some letter from the publishers telling her how to change it in some way to make it fit their needs?

Natalie quickly tore open the inner wrapper. There was a slip of paper lying on the first page of the manuscript. She turned it over. Printed "regrets"—nothing more! She already had half

a drawful of such flowery phrases from other publishers.

It was an hour before she could face the rest of the family. She had kept the existence of her book a secret even from Laura, and she would not explain now what was the matter. Nor had she told her sisters about what she had heard the night before regarding the wreck of the *Sakonnet*.

"One thing is sure," grumbled Laura, "*you* didn't have a very pleasant time last night at Miss Jarrold's 'soirée'—that goes without saying. I never saw you so grumpy in my whole life before!"

And perhaps Natalie could be excused for losing heart just at this time. The bringing up before her of the keen remembrance of her father's death—the stirring up again of all that mystery about his disappearance—was sufficient alone to make the girl unhappy.

And the return of "Her Way Out" was a second blow that gave the finishing stroke to all Natalie's cheerfulness.

Secretly she took herself to task for even *trying* to write a book. How could she expect to? She didn't know enough—she hadn't the experience—above all, she doubted her talent.

"Of course, I know just about enough to do my department work and please the kiddies," she

told herself, hopelessly. "But I was foolish to waste so many, many hours upon that which can never bring me in anything. I declare! I might have better spent the time crocheting."

Yes—as Laura expressed it—the oldest of the four Raymond girls was fairly "in the dumps." Nothing looked hopeful to her now. And the day passed without her hearing from Mr. Van Weir.

But the post brought a brief letter from him the next day. And even this bore disappointment to the girl:

My dear Miss Raymond:

The blizzard was a bad thing for our plans. They have gone "a-gley" for a while, I fear. Before I could locate Bender's rooms he had started for Florida, for the tarpon fishing. I managed to get his hotel address and have already written him. I have asked for full particulars of his experience on the *Sakonnet,* and especially for everything about the man whom he started to tell us about at Miss Jarrold's. If the man was hurt—seriously or otherwise—he will tell me, and his final disposal, if he knows, as well.

Cheer up. I can imagine just how anxious you are to hear the last detail of your unfortunate

father's story. If Bender knows it, Bender will tell us.

With regards,

HARVEY VAN WEIR.

Mr. Van Weir wrote as though he had no hope of there being anything certain or comforting in Bender's story. But Natalie was thankful to the editor for taking so much pains on her behalf, and she wrote him a little note, making this plain.

Burlingboro was "plowed out" by this time and Natalie could get down town. Having some bits for the *Banner* she went in and saw Mr. Franklin. Somehow the old gentleman seemed to see the despondency in her face at once.

"What's the matter now? What's the matter now?" he demanded. "Plainly the world is not all roses this morning for Miss Natalie Raymond."

"Was it ever?" asked the girl, rather sharply.

"Yes. There was a time. That was before she awoke to the realities of life," said the editor of the *Banner,* thoughtfully. "And, too, for a time there were compensations even for the troubles heaped upon her. *Now* what is it?"

"Oh, everything, I guess!" exclaimed Natalie, but unable to laugh.

"Wait! I can guess," cried he, smacking his

open palm down upon his desk. "You have struck a snag. You have come to one of those dreadful catastrophes of life—especially of the literary life. I know it—I can see it," he added, as Natalie began to blush.

"Your book has been returned from the very first publisher to whom you submitted it. Is that it?"

"It has come back," admitted Natalie, bitterly.

"From the first publisher?"

"Why—yes."

"Where's that list I gave you of possible chances?" demanded Mr. Franklin, sternly.

"I—I——"

"You've tried only one house and I gave you the names of a dozen to start with. Send it out again at once. Send it out, and keep sending it, till it is in rags, if need be.

"Do you suppose," he demanded quite hotly, "that the books you read were all accepted by the first publisher to whom they were sent—or the second, or third, or *dozenth,* for that matter?

"Writing a book is only the beginning. The selling of it is the harder matter. Many a writer can write in a month what it takes him two years to sell.

"Ah, Natalie! where is your courage? See what fine success you have already had! You

have done much better than the ordinary young writer. And to completely lose heart because the first publishing house does not grab your first book with both hands? Bah!"

"Oh, you can 'bah!'" began Natalie, half laughing and half crying, when he interrupted her more kindly:

"Don't lost heart, my dear. Promise me you will send the manuscript this very day to the next house on the list. And keep on, one after another. Perseverance is the virtue you must cultivate, Natalie."

Perhaps this was not wholly so, for the girl *had* shown perseverance at times; but Mr. Franklin's words sank deep in her mind at this time, and she obeyed him. She could not recover her spirits, however, for the time being.

"And Jim Hurley's party in sight," cried Laura, shaking her one day when they were trying on the new dresses after Miss Twist had done her part. "And it's going to be the greatest party that ever was—Jim says so himself.

"Do wake up, Nat! Don't be such a 'dead one.' It looks to me as though, after all we'd gone through, and we so much better off than we were in the summer, you ought to be as cheerful as a little grig!"

Natalie saw into Life deeper than her younger

sister, however. She could not see that the circumstances of the family had so much improved. Had Mr. Orton's charity not come so opportunely none of them would now be scarcely fit to be seen on the street.

And although she had obeyed Mr. Franklin's behest and sent the manuscript of "Her Way Out" to another publisher, she had no high hopes centred in that child of her brain.

She had nothing to really look forward to but the fifteen dollars each week from *Our Twentieth Century Home;* and as far as she could see, that work was just as much of a grind as ever the notion counter had been at Kester & Baum's.

To tell the truth, Natalie wondered if she had not done wrong in giving up her position in the store. Helena Comfort had now been advanced to the head of a department and was drawing fifteen dollars a week, and commissions on sales. And Mr. Kester had assured Natalie that she would be successful in trade.

It was not that Natalie had entirely lost the love for her writing; but circumstances had conspired to make her doubt if her course in giving her whole time to it had been wise.

Nothing aside from the department work had been successful of late. The third story she had tried for Mr. Van Weir had fallen through miser-

ably. She could not strike again, it seemed, the high note of "The Robbers of the Year" and "Partners in Crime."

She could only be thankful that her mother's condition of mind and body was no worse. Mrs. Raymond had gained a confidence in her oldest daughter's ability to manage and get along that delighted Natalie at times. When she was in the doldrums—as now—however, nothing pleased the young girl.

Laura had to fairly drag her out of her apathy the evening of Jim's birthday party. Mrs. Hackett had come over to help them dress, and would remain with Mrs. Raymond and the children until the girls got home.

"Sure, there'll be no sinseless man wid his stories av wreck an' disaster to trouble ye to-night, Miss Nat'lie," urged the Irish woman. "And ye certain-sure look swate in that frock. 'Tis no wonder that Dutchman couldn't kape his eyes off ye that night."

"What Dutchman?" demanded Laura. "Natalie never said a word about a Dutchman. Did she have more than *one* beau?"

"Whist now! Ain't it a respictible gur-rl yer sister is?" demanded Mrs. Hackett. "She's not wan of these fly-away gur-rls that have as many beaus as a cinterpig has legs—thanks be!

"But his name was Dutch——"

"Mr. Van Weir," explained Natalie. "And I don't think he was any more attentive to me than he was to *you,* Mrs. Hackett."

"Arrah! go along now wid yer blarney. Sure, Jenny Hackett had her toime wid the young felleys long, long ago," declared the old woman, bridling nevertheless and smirking at herself in the mirror, greatly to Laura's delight.

But the sisters were made ready at last, and very pretty they looked. Laura, in her way, was quite as pleasant to look upon as the darker Natalie. It was not far to the Hurley house, so of course they walked.

Before they got there they were joined by other young people bound for the same goal. So they entered, and the girls went up to the dressing-room, with quite a party of laughing, fluttering girls.

When Natalie dropped the cloak from her shoulders inside the dressing-room door Estelle Mayberry was right beside her. Natalie had not seen Estelle often—that is, to speak to—since their graduation from high school the June before. And she had felt that Estelle could not forget that Natalie had worked behind the notion counter at Kester & Baum's.

Now she felt that Estelle looked her over very

sharply as she shook out her flounces and rearranged the bouquet of hothouse roses that Jim had sent her.

Estelle seemed to give particular attention to Natalie's frock. She walked all around her without saying a word, and then she backed to Sally Fitch, and began to whisper.

Miss Mayberry's attentions were so marked that Natalie sought Laura and asked her sister to look her all over to make sure that there was nothing the matter with her frock.

"Why, you look as pretty as a picture!" Laura assured her. "And of course there's nothing the matter with the dress. There isn't a nicer looking one here. Bless that Mr. Orton."

But Natalie went down to greet Jim and his mother with a fluttering feeling at her heart.

CHAPTER XXV

"IT SERVES ME RIGHT"

THE Hurleys had built their fine house so that the drawing-room and the library could be thrown into one large apartment. The carpets were off the floors and in one corner, masked by potted palms and the like, was a small string orchestra that was already playing softly.

The lilt of the music, the odor of the cut flowers, a little fountain playing in a bowl at one end of the long apartment, and the movement and light and bustle and pretty dresses, already made a charming picture.

It was the first social gathering of *this* kind which Natalie had attended since graduation—and she had missed the reception and class supper in the evening of that fatal day, too.

Mrs. Hurley welcomed Natalie warmly. She was a large, black-browed woman, who had been handsome in her youth and had a good figure now. Jim had her deep gray eyes.

"How pretty you look, child! Turn around and let me see," she said, smiling, and squeezing

Natalie's hand. "That frock certainly *is* becoming."

"It would be something pretty bad you put on Natalie that wouldn't look becoming," declared Jim, from his wheel-chair—"his throne" he called it for this one evening.

Somehow the look that passed between mother and son warned Natalie of something. She was suspicious—but why?

The Hurleys had never been anything but kind to her. Jim was as faithful as Old Dog Tray—*too* faithful to suit Natalie at times!

And yet she was worried and puzzled. When Jim whispered to her to stand near his chair and help his mother welcome the guests, she shook her head, pursing her lips at him, and went away by herself. There was something wrong. What it was Natalie could not imagine.

Laura had found a flock of girls and boys of her own age, and with her own school interests, and they were chattering in one corner almost loudly enough to drown out the orchestra.

Natalie saw several of her own school companions; but aside from the boys—who all seemed delighted to see her again—she did not, somehow "warm up" to those who had once been her very closest daily comrades.

She had truly outgrown the girls' interests.

Her social life among the younger set of Burlingboro had lapsed. The girls who talked with her seemed diffident, or afraid of her. And some of them stared at her a good deal as Estelle had done.

Indeed, she passed more than one or two whispering groups who ceased to whisper and looked self-conscious when Natalie was near. That they were talking about her the girl could not doubt. Yet she could not understand it.

Natalie had really been very popular during her schooldays. She had had no "spoon" or close chum, as so many girls have in their school-life. But she had made no enemies and there had been little jealousy displayed when she was elected class president.

This new attitude of her old schoolmates toward her she could not fathom—not at first. But before the evening was half over the girl had her eyes opened in a way that shocked her terribly.

At one end of the library was the door into the conservatory. This door was open and the damp, sweet breath of the hot-house plants flowed out into the larger apartment. But the opening was masked by huge ferns, and Natalie, having danced rather vigorously with one of her boy friends, slipped in behind these ferns to sit on a bench and wait until her escort brought her an ice.

And just as she had settled her skirts she heard the rustle of other skirts on the other side of the green screen, and a sharp voice said:

"Of course the dress is pretty. It was the prettiest one that Evans & Cribble had in their whole store."

It was Estelle Mayberry who spoke, and she was evidently in no pleasant mood.

"That dress by right belongs to me. I ought to be wearing it—and I hope it would look better on me than it does on that dowdy thing!" pursued Estelle.

"Why! how you talk, Essie!" gasped her companion.

"I don't care. That pauper, Nat Raymond, has no business with such a frock. Why! they can scarcely pay their bills at the grocery. I guess Mr. Fanner told my mother how he had to shut down on them——"

"Hush!" begged the other girl.

"I don't care. It's so. And then she having the cheek to come here and parade that dress before us all—and it given to her. And I expect Laura has on a charity dress, too."

Natalie was frozen in her place. She could not have moved, or spoken, had she so desired. The other girl said, in a milder tone:

"But, Essie, *my* party dress was given me, too —by my aunt."

"These Raymonds didn't get their clothes in any such way," declared Estelle. "Oh, I know all about it. Mother and I had been in Evans & Cribble's and had seen that frock and asked the girl to put it aside for us until we came back. But Mrs. Hurley came in and saw it, and she grabbed it——"

"Mrs. Hurley? Jim's mother?"

"Sure. And she bought that, and a lot of other dresses and coats. Now, you know Mrs. Hurley has no girls, and no nieces, or any other relatives. She bought things for all those Raymond girls, I'll be bound. That's how they came to be togged out so at church last Sunday. They're just paupers. And I wanted that frock Nat's wearing more than I ever wanted a dress before in my life!" wailed Estelle at last.

Just then Tom Hutchins appeared with Natalie's ice, and the other two girls, unconscious that they had had a listener, moved away.

"Why, Natalie! Are you sick?" gasped big, blundering Tom. "You're faint! Gee! Whatever will I do?"

He grabbed the napkin and dabbled a corner of it in the ice, and began to dampen her forehead with it. Big Tom, who was fullback on the foot-

ball team, had no sisters at home and was entirely unused to seeing girls faint.

But this brought Natalie back to an appreciation of her situation in a hurry.

"Oh, my frock!" she gasped.

"I haven't spilled a drop on it," declared Tom, earnestly.

Natalie began to giggle. It was merely nervousness, but the fact that Tom thought she had been afraid of his spoiling her dress was certainly funny. She hated it!

She never could wear Mrs. Hurley's gift with any pleasure again. The whole community would know that she, and her sisters, were objects of Mrs. Hurley's charity.

"It serves me right—it serves me just right!" Natalie said over and over in her mind.

But she had to recover herself now, for Tom's sake. She even ate the remainder of the ice to please him. But it was just *dreadful* to have to go back to the big room, where the crowd was, and face all those girls.

Estelle was repeating her tale to everybody who would listen, and even the most kindly disposed would only pity Natalie. And she hated to be pitied!

Indeed, the bubble of Natalie Raymond's independence was most woefully pricked. She had

prided herself, at least, upon getting along without outside assistance. Only from Mr. Orton, she thought, could she have accepted the clothing that had come to them so timely.

And Jim's mother!

Appreciating the kindly spirit in which the donation was made, Natalie still felt that the Hurleys were the last people from whom she could have accepted such a favor.

Jim liked her too well. The crippled boy's mother had undoubtedly done this because her son asked her to. No wonder the frocks and coats had all fitted so well! Jim knew their needs almost as well as the Raymond girls knew them.

She would have liked to go home at once, and take Laura with her. But that would have been both a cowardly and an ungenerous thing to do, and Natalie realized it.

Besides, another thought came to her. Why tell Laura at all? Why not ignore this ill-natured talk of Estelle Mayberry? Perhaps Laura would not even hear it. She had only heard it herself by accident.

But it was hard to move about among the company, and smile, and talk lightly, and go now and then to Jim with a cheerful word, and a good wish for "many happy returns of the day."

She was sorry she was so popular with the boys.

And having danced already with several of her old school companions, she could not refuse others who crowded her card with their names and little funny jingles, or good wishes.

And all her popularity, she felt, added to Estelle's spleen. Mrs. Hurley certainly had chosen the frock with an appreciation of Natalie's style of beauty. The girl told herself that Estelle could not possibly have looked so well in it.

Yet that was no satisfaction, for Natalie Raymond's character suffered from few small feminine faults. She loved good clothes as well as the next girl; but she was not jealous of other girls' good looks.

And after her experience of the last few months, these boys whom she had gone to school with did not much interest her. She would have been glad to sit in a quiet corner somewhere and wait for Laura to get tired, and so go home at the earliest possible moment.

It was not to be, however. But she "sat out" as many dances as possible, rather than flaunt that "charity frock" on the ballroom floor and cause unkind comment.

"Why, you are not dancing much, Natalie," said Mrs. Hurley. "And you *do* look so pretty to-night, child."

Natalie swallowed a large lump in her throat, and answered:

"If I look pretty, it is my frock that makes me, dear Mrs. Hurley. It was an 'angel's gift,' you know. And I *am* heartily grateful to the kind thought that prompted it."

Mrs. Hurley flushed a little, but tapped Natalie with her fan.

"If you have good friends, you deserve them, Natalie," she said.

CHAPTER XXVI

A MYSTERY

LAURA declared that she had had " a most glorious time." She was so full of it all that she failed to observe her older sister's subdued manner and her silence.

The little girls had tried to remain awake for their big sisters' home-coming; but it had been impossible; so Natalie slipped an orange in each chubby hand as they lay asleep, and then the Raymond cottage was soon wrapped in slumber for the remaining early morning hours.

All but Natalie slept. It was long ere she closed her eyes, for she was sorely hurt in heart and pride.

Once Estelle Mayberry had been as friendly with her as any girl in school; it seemed too, too hard that she had turned against her for so small a cause.

And by accepting the gifts from Mrs. Hurley for herself and her sisters Natalie believed she had laid herself—and them—open to many such unkind speeches. The community at large would, of course, know all about it. People would know

that, after all, Natalie Raymond had been unable to keep the family in comfort without outside help.

For the first time the Raymond family were objects of charity. How her mother would feel if she ever learned of it! Natalie prayed that the knowledge might be kept from the invalid for all time.

The family did not note particularly Natalie's drooping the following day; or it was credited to the dissipation of Jim Hurley's birthday party.

But in the evening, by the last mail, she received a letter from Mr. Van Weir. Instantly she forgot the "charity frocks" and Estelle Mayberry's unkindness. She seized the letter, which was a thick one, and retired to her own room.

It was a kind letter, and Natalie's heart warmed toward the busy man who had taken so much of his time to try to satisfy her anxiety about her father's disappearance. Yet all that Mr. Van Weir had learned did not seem at first reading to promise anything important. The mystery seemed still a mystery.

The editor had quoted certain paragraphs in Mr. Bender's letter which Natalie read over and over again:

"I did not hear the man's name. He was of medium height, light brown hair, a cheerful face,

and he wore a blue suit, with a wire-gold watch-chain across his vest-front.

"As I said the other night, he pulled off his coat to wrap around a child, and later picked up a sailor's jumper and Scotch cap to fill out the necessities of his own wardrobe.

"When the firemen of the *Sakonnet* broke loose for the second time, this man was one who rushed between the brutes and the women who were being lowered into the boats.

"A man struck him on the head with an iron bar. He fell and, later, I saw him lying in a corner, evidently still unconscious. I saw Mr. Harris, the purser, bending over him, and I believed he was one of the twenty-three passengers the purser reported as having saved in his boat and taken aboard the Boston-bound steamer."

Natalie sat with the letter in her hand and studied the matter calmly. Mr. Bender had carried the story of what had happened to Mr. Raymond farther than anybody else; but she could not encourage herself to believe that there was an atom of hope to be gleaned from it.

Further on in Mr. Van Weir's letter, the editor wrote:

"I have called up the office of the owners of

the *Sakonnet.* Mr. Harris is now on one of their other steamers—the *Bremen.* It is due in port in a few days. I will write to Mr. Harris for an interview, and either he will come and see me when he arrives, or I shall go to see him. We will learn the last possible thing there is to learn about your father's disappearance."

But Natalie could not allow Mr. Van Weir to do all this by himself. She was too deeply interested in the mystery.

Without any hope that her father was alive, she felt that she must see and talk with Purser Harris in person. So she wrote to Mr. Van Weir, asking him to make the appointment for her to see Mr. Harris, too.

It chanced that she did not hear from the editor again until she went into New York the next week on her usual day.

"I am glad you have come, Miss Natalie," he said, shaking hands with her. "I was about to send you a telegram. I believe you'll have to come in here and have a desk, or else rig a telephone in your house," and he laughed.

"Am I as important as all that?" she asked, trying to smile in return.

"There is a little extra work I believe I can throw your way after this week. You know, it

isn't the firm's way to raise salaries except at Christmas; but I believe I can get you five dollars more a week for this work I speak of. And you can do it at home."

"Oh, Mr. Van Weir! That will be a great help, I am sure."

"But I don't want your talent tied down to editorial work altogether," he returned, quickly. "We must have some more short stories from you.

"But this isn't the point just now," continued the editor. "I was going to telegraph you because the *Bremen* is in, and Mr. Harris has telephoned up that he can see us on board of her any time after three this afternoon."

"Oh, Mr. Van Weir!"

"Now, don't you get the idea that there is really anything to learn about your father's death more than you know already," said her friend, steadily. "*That* won't do at all."

"I—I suppose I am foolish."

"If you get all worked up, expecting some marvel to transpire, this inquiry will do you much harm," spoke Mr. Van Weir, gravely. "Can't you see that?"

"I know it, sir," returned Natalie, struggling for self-control. "But you do not know how hard it is——"

"I can imagine," he observed, quietly. "Yet

make up your mind that your poor father was drowned when the *Sakonnet* went down. Why! what else could have happened? Surely, after all these months, if he had been alive you would have heard from him!"

Natalie knew this to be true. She did her best to harden her heart against the thought that in some wonderful way she was to hear from Purser Harris something of importance regarding Mr. Raymond.

She busied herself about her desk work, and Mr. Van Weir postponed his luncheon hour until later, so that they could go out together, and from the restaurant set sail for the dock where the *Bremen* lay.

Bumping over the rough seas of West Street in a Belt Line car was a new experience for Natalie; had she not been so much worried over the mystery they were seeking to solve, she would have enjoyed the trip.

Mr. Van Weir did his best to take her mind off the trouble; and she found him even more entertaining and kind than he had ever been before. But she began to question herself, too, as to *why* Harvey Van Weir should give her so much of his time and be so deeply interested in her affairs?

They reached the dock and walked down the long, covered way, amid the rumbling trucks, the

shouting teamsters, the stevedores hustling freight, and all the smelly, bustling confusion of one steamer being unloaded on the one hand, while another was being laden at the other side of the dock.

There was a single passenger-plank connecting the *Bremen* with the dock, and a sailor stood guarding that. But when Mr. Van Weir spoke Mr. Harris's name the man allowed them aboard.

"Purser's in his room, sir. He is expecting you. Ask any of the stewards to show you," said the sailor.

The purser's cabin was on the main deck, forward, and on the outer tier. The purser himself was an angular man, with a bristling mustache and sharp Scotch eyes that examined Natalie and her escort keenly.

"I'm thinkin' you're the gentleman who telephoned me?" he asked of Mr. Van Weir.

The editor admitted it.

"And this is the young leddy—Miss Raymond?"

Natalie, too, bowed.

"'Tis sad news ye received of your feyther last June, Miss," said the purser, coming at once to the point. "He was the only passenger lost of them all. It was a good showin'—that; but it makes it no less hard for this young leddy, I

fancy, even if we *do* pride oursel's upon that fact.

"Nae. The poor mon went overboard, I take it, after the bit of scrimmage in which they say he was hurt. I didna' see it, havin' my hands full at the time gettin' ready my own boat."

"But there is a passenger who tells us that he saw you examining Mr. Raymond after he was hurt," said Van Weir, quietly.

"He's wrang! wrang!" declared the purser, shaking his head. "I admit I scarcely remember the man at all, although his name was on my list, fair enough. It was a busy an' confusin' time, as ye may be sure."

"And by no chance was my father taken, wounded, into your boat, sir?" asked Natalie, with clasped hands.

"Nae, nae!" cried the purser. "Never think it. I put three men in hospital at Boston, but they was just hands. One we took out of his berth and lowered intae my boat. The other acted ugly and I knocked him out mesel' with an oar before we boarded the other steamer."

"And the third?" asked Natalie, anxiously.

"One o' them firemen that mutinied. He got a crack, *he* did. Served him right, I say. Last I knew he was still in hospital. 'Tis little sympathy ye should waste on the likes o' *him*."

Natalie remained silent, but her keen disappointment was plainly written on her face.

"And, of course, the twenty-three passengers saved in your boat are all accounted for?" asked Harvey Van Weir, softly.

"True for ye. Every last mon of them. One passenger went to hospital, too; but that was Maister Bowley, and his wife came on from the West and took him home with her as soon as he could travel.

"Nae, nae," repeated Mr. Harris. "There's ne'er a thing *I* know about Mr. Frank Raymond. I think there's nae mystery or doot aboot it. The mon was hurt and slipped overboard in the confusion. 'Twas dark, too, ye ken."

"I know, I know," said Mr. Van Weir, shaking his head, too, and looking sadly at Natalie.

It was plain that he, too, like the purser, saw no use in the girl's pursuing her inquiry farther.

CHAPTER XXVII

PETE DARBY "PUTS ON THE SOFT PEDAL"

THEY arose to go, but Mr. Harris waved them back to their seats, and called a steward. Sea-going men are the most hospitable in the world, and in a moment a white-jacketed black man appeared with a big tray on which steamed tea and coffee, with plates piled with sweet cakes and biscuit, flanked by little mounds of butter.

"Ye'll honor me by takin' a wee sup?" said the purser, nor would he hear of a refusal.

While she sipped her tea, Natalie asked:

"To which hospital in Boston were the injured men sent when you arrived there, Mr. Harris?"

He told her, but shook his head. "'Tis a foolish quest, lassie," he said. "An' 'twill make ye a sore heart. Give it up."

Mr. Van Weir repeated the same advice when they went away from the dock.

"Give it up, for there is no hope, Miss Raymond."

Her own heart told her to give it up. Yet, that very night, when the others were abed, she

wrote to the head surgeon of the Boston hospital inquiring about the four men—one a passenger —who were brought to that institution from the wrecked steamship *Sakonnet* in June of the previous year.

Seven months had passed, and yet Natalie Raymond could not give up the last shred of hope that there was still something to learn about her father's disappearance.

She sent the letter in the morning and then tried to put the whole matter out of her mind. She had more work to do for the magazine now, and that helped. And certainly, the promised five dollars a week extra was something pleasant to look forward to.

There were plenty of domestic worries all the time, however; Natalie did not always find it easy sailing in the family's affairs.

One bill hung over her head like a sword of menace, and since she had taken hold of the management of the family's affairs she had never been able to pay a dollar on it; and it was increasing all the time.

This was the doctor's bill. Dr. Protest was very nice about it, but his account now amounted to more than a hundred dollars, and how she should ever pay it Natalie had not the least idea.

She decided to say nothing to Laura or her

mother about this extra five dollars she was to receive from *Our Twentieth Century Home,* and begin giving the physician that five weekly. It would be a very slow way of paying the bill, but it would help some.

January had run out and the shortest month of all the year had come in with its raw days when Natalie, sitting reflectively at her desk overlooking the front door of the cottage, saw a man picking his way through the slush to the stoop. For a moment she was puzzled to identify the figure under the wind-tossed umbrella; then she saw it was Peter Darby.

She had long since ceased to place any hope in recovering anything from Mr. Murch, of her father's old firm; and the detective and his promise had not been in her mind of late.

But she believed it must be something he considered of importance that would bring her odd friend to the house. Pete Darby was an individual who usually lurked about, seemed to have business in all quarters of the town, and rarely spoke to her on the street. A formal call on Pete's part must mean something.

She ran down to let him in, the children being all at school, and invited him into the parlor.

"Hope I don't bother you, Miss," said the young man, his face perfectly expressionless.

"If so, another time will do. Never like to intrude on a lady's privacy."

"I must be very, very busy indeed, Mr. Darby, when I could refuse to see you," she told him, smiling.

His eyes smiled at her in return, although his face remained perfectly wooden.

"That's kind of ye, Miss, and I certainly do appreciate it," he said. "And now to business."

"Business?"

"Yes, *ma'am!* Was you forgetting that man with the sideboards and the glassy eye that we had the run-in with?"

"Mr. Murch?"

"That's him."

"What about him, Mr. Darby?" asked Natalie, with revived interest. "Of course, old Mr. Favor hasn't returned home?"

"Near as I can find out the old gent won't have much to say about the business, even if he does come back from Yurrup," said Mr. Darby, wagging his head. "That man, Murch, has got the whole swing of it himself."

"Then there's not much hope of our ever getting any money that may be due to father on commissions," said Natalie, with a sigh.

"Ahem!" said the detective. "It's too early

to say that. I—I been workin' on the case some——"

"That's very kind of you, Mr. Darby; I don't know how I ever can pay you," said Natalie, hurriedly.

"I never put in a claim for damages till the case is closed," responded Mr. Darby, drily. "And I don't call it closed yet. What I'm here for is to ask you, Miss, if you'd go over to New York again with me some day this week."

"To New York? To see Mr. Murch again?" asked Natalie, doubtfully.

"That's it, Miss. Nothing in the way, is there? I can wait your convenience."

"But—but will it do any good? I don't like Mr. Murch."

Perhaps Mr. Darby chuckled; at least, he made a clucking nose in his throat that indicated as much; but, as he would have said himself, "his face never slipped."

"I'm not fond of that party myself, Miss. But I'll be right with you, and if that man gets fresh, Pete Darby will put the soft pedal on him —now don't you forget *that.*"

At another time, and upon another subject, Natalie would have been vastly amused by Mr. Darby's striking manner of speech and his personality. Indeed, she had already tried to "use"

the detective in a short story, and she was glad to study him a bit.

Besides, he had befriended her and was attempting now, it was evident, to help her again.

"I am very, very grateful to you, Mr. Darby," she repeated. "But do you think it will do any good for me to see Mr. Murch again?"

"We'll try it," said the detective. "He won't eat us, if we go there, that's sure."

So Natalie, after some further hesitation, agreed to meet Mr. Darby the next day she went to town on the business of the magazine, and the detective backed out bashfully, yet still with a perfectly unmoved countenance.

This made a rather amusing rift in Natalie Raymond's sombre existence at this time. Rose came home that noon from school in tears.

"Why do some of the girls say such mean things to me?" she sobbed, with her face hidden in Natalie's lap.

"What do they say, dearie?" asked the oldest of the girls, yet smitten with the thought that she already knew.

"They say I'm a charity child. They call me 'pauper.' Beth Mayberry says we are so poor that other people have to buy our clothes—and I never told them a word about the angel's gift!"

"Never you mind, Rose," soothed the big

sister. "You be a brave little girl and stand it. As soon as sister can she will buy you a brand new dress herself, and then you won't have to wear this frock."

"Oh, Natalie! I want to be good; but I don't like to be a charity child," moaned the little one.

"Don't tell Laura, or mamma," urged Natalie, and comforted Rose the best she could.

To her amazement Laura seemed never to have gotten wind of the real facts about the gift of clothing. But Laura had a very sharp tongue of her own, and was not easily browbeaten. Perhaps no ill-natured schoolmate had dared risk taunting the second Raymond girl as they had gentle little Rose.

It was before Natalie went to the city again that she received a reply from the chief surgeon of the Boston hospital to which she had been referred by Purser Harris. It was a brief letter, and seemed to settle the matter for all time, as far as any hope lay in the possibility of her father being still alive. It read:

"*Dear Miss Raymond:*

"Upon reference to our books and to my own memory of the circumstances regarding the bringing here of the four survivors of the wreck of the *Sakonnet,* the following are the facts:

"They were booked as three seamen and one passenger. Mr. Bowley, of Indianapolis, was suffering from shock and exposure, being in a weakened condition from an operation performed two months before. His wife came on for him and removed him from the hospital. One of the seamen was suffering from an infectious disease and was removed within an hour of his arrival to another hospital. He said his name was Harrigan. Jim Smith had a bad scalp wound, but left the hospital two days after being booked.

"The third seaman is still with us as an orderly. He seems to have no friends and is a case that I am still studying. He seemed to have no injury saving a bruise above the left temple. Whether that bruise is the cause of his mental state or not we have been unable to decide. He may never have been strong mentally. The officer who placed him in our care, Mr. Harris, knew no more about him than he did about the other two seamen.

"As I understand it, the other twenty-two passengers saved in Mr. Harris's boat are all accounted for. Harrigan, or Smith, might have told us something about this third unfortunate of whom I speak above; but Smith has disappeared and Harrigan died a month later in hospital.

"Very respectfully yours,

"MYRON G. BLODGETT, M.D."

It was plain enough. Even an imaginative girl like Natalie Raymond could find little in such a decisive statement of fact to encourage any romantic vaporings.

She folded the letter and returned it to its envelope with a sigh, and tucked the envelope in her hand-bag. When she went to the magazine office she showed it to Mr. Van Weir.

"Ah, Miss Raymond!" he said, shaking his head. "Give it up! Give it up!" and laid the letter, open, upon the edge of his desk.

She tried to smile at him bravely, and went away to her work. Later she slipped out of the office without seeing the editor again, to keep her appointment with Peter Darby.

When the bullet-headed young detective appeared before Natalie in the ladies' parlor of the down-town hotel where he had agreed to meet her, he had in tow a surprisingly shabby and dissipated looking individual, whose bulbous nose and watery eyes betokened a dalliance with John Barleycorn which amazed and disgusted the girl.

"Who—who is that person, Mr. Darby?" she asked.

"Looks the bad egg right down to the ground—eh, Miss?" said the young man, coolly. "He is, too; but he's knowing, and he's cheap——"

"But *what* does he know?" demanded the girl.

"Law, Miss. And he's a hummer. I've kept him locked up ever since I called on you to make this appointment. He's dead sober."

"I should hope so," sighed Natalie, much afraid that she was doing wrong to have met the detective on this strange quest.

This was the young girl who had been afraid a few months before to go anywhere without a chaperon!

"He's as safe as a house," declared Mr. Darby, hoarsely. "I won't let him walk with us—let him trail along behind. No! better still, let him go ahead; then I can keep an eye on him. We may have to pass a saloon," declared this eminently practical young man.

"Well," thought Natalie, "I have come this far, I may as well see it through."

But she *did* wonder what Mr. Van Weir would say if he could see her set off for Wall Street convoyed by Mr. Darby, who kept one of his very sharp gray eyes fixed upon the shabby back of the lawyer.

In half an hour they came to the offices of Favor & Murch. The same smart boy met them at the gate. He grinned knowingly at Natalie, and this seemed to incense Mr. Darby.

He leaned across the gate suddenly and hooked

a finger over the boy's celluloid collar, drawing him suddenly forward.

"See this?" he snapped, giving the youngster a flashing glimpse of the shield on his vest. "Take us in to your boss. Never mind announcing us. We'll announce ourselves. Savvy?"

Evidently the youth did. Perhaps it was the clutch on his collar that made his eyes pop out; however, he led the way immediately to Mr. Murch's private office.

Mr. Darby marched in, with Natalie beside him. The lawyer brought up the rear.

Mr. Murch stared at them over his broad-topped desk, first in wonder, then in wrath. Then he opened his mouth and began asking, most vociferously, how they dared intrude upon his privacy.

"Steady, boss," advised Mr. Darby. "It doesn't take any courage at all to do this. Listen to my friend here with the green bag for a minute, or two, and you'll understand why we have come."

"How dare you, you scoundrel?" repeated Mr. Murch, when Darby suddenly leaned across the desk and shook his finger in the merchant's face.

"Soft pedal, boss! Do you hear me? We've got you dead to rights, and we're going to make

you sing small before we're out of this room. Understand me?"

"No, I don't," snarled Mr. Murch.

"Show him the letters," said Darby to the lawyer.

The latter drew forth a bundle of documents.

"Know what they are?" asked the detective.

"No," gasped the merchant.

"They're copies of orders given to Mr. Frank Raymond on his last business trip for this house from no less than eighty-seven customers through the South and the West Indies. Your firm has filled, or is filling those orders. How about making an accounting of these orders for this young lady and her mother, and paying over the commissions due to them? Eh? How does that strike you, my friend?"

CHAPTER XXVIII

IN BOSTON

Mr. Murch may have been surprised by the detective's statement. He probably was.

But his astonishment was more than equalled by Natalie's. Mr. Darby, who dearly loved a sensation, had succeeded in working one up on this occasion. The young girl heard what followed in a daze.

Mr. Murch was not the man to give in easily. They had to show him proof, and finally Mr. Darby threatened him seriously before he came to terms.

But the detective was sure of his man, while the lawyer, disreputable as he looked, was sure of his case.

After an hour Mr. Murch capitulated, the account was figured up, a check for nearly five hundred dollars was drawn by the dishonest merchant, and they only lingered while Darby went out with a clerk to have the check certified at the bank.

"I hope I've seen the last of you," snarled Mr. Murch, when they were ready to withdraw.

"It's a case of 'hoss and hoss,' old chap," declared the detective. "We're none of us going to weep any briny tears as we go out—don't believe it!"

But Natalie could forgive even the mean-spirited Mr. Murch when she saw the certified check actually in her hand.

"Mr. Darby! you are surely my friend in need! Why, I cannot believe this is true. It relieves me of very pressing necessities——"

She could go no farther for the moment without breaking down. Mr. Darby looked more uncomfortable than he ever had before in her presence. Beads of perspiration stood upon his brow, cold as the day was.

"Don't you say another word! Don't you say another word, Miss," he threatened. "It wasn't anything. It gave me more fun than a barrel of monkeys to get that man right—Beg pardon, Miss! I know my language isn't high-toned, but——"

"Your heart is high-toned, Mr. Darby," said Natalie, recovering her own self-control. "And now, what am I to pay you and your—your companion for your services?" and she looked a little doubtfully at the shabby man, who had only opened his lips—and then to such good purpose—in the merchant's office.

"Oh, *him?*" grunted Mr. Darby, suddenly made aware of the shabby man's presence. "He knows where to get his pay. Be off with you, now," he added, to the strange man. "We've got through with *you,* I hope."

"Oh, is that fair, sir?" asked Natalie, timidly, as the shabby man slunk away.

"Quite. He's had his pay days ago."

"Then you have paid him?" said Natalie, quickly.

"All in the expense account, Miss. And it isn't much. He works cheap. Nobody trusts him but me. And I know how to handle him. Why, if he could only keep straight he'd just waller in wealth; but it's a shame to give him money——"

"You have certainly been to much expense," interrupted Natalie, firmly. "I want to pay you for your trouble, and for that man's work."

"Very well, Miss," said the detective, humbly. "I don't expect you'd take it as a free gift, like?"

"Most certainly not, Mr. Darby," said the young girl, yet smiling at him. "Why, I feel rich with so much money."

"Well," said the young man, slowly, "when you bank that check you send me your check for thirty-seven-forty. That's the exact amount."

"Of expense money?"

"And my fee, too," he declared, quickly.

"Really, it was a cinch, Miss Raymond. And then—the satisfaction of putting that man in a hole— Why, Miss, I wouldn't take a hundred dollars for the satisfaction, and that's the truth!"

And that was every cent Natalie could make Mr. Darby accept. He hurried away, then, so that she could urge him no more, and the young girl took train for Burlingboro, feeling as though she could not get home quickly enough to tell the good news.

But she took Mr. Darby's hint and banked the check before turning her steps toward the Vesey Street cottage. When she reached this final goal she was amazed to be met by Laura, who ran hatless out of the house to meet her on the path.

"Who do you suppose is in the parlor?" she cried.

"I haven't the least idea," said the astonished older sister.

"Your Mr. Van Weir. And *isn't* he nice? And he's sent for Mrs. Hackett. And he says he is going to take her to Boston this very night."

"To Boston? Take Mrs. Hackett to Boston?" gasped the astounded Natalie.

"Oh! and you're to go to. It's something about the magazine work, I s'pose, but he says he wants Mrs. Hackett for chaperon. What *does* it mean, Natalie?"

Boston! The word thrilled Natalie strangely. Her thought flew to the letter from the hospital surgeon. She ran into the house and into the parlor—and shut Laura out, much to that young lady's indignation.

"Mr. Van Weir!" gasped Natalie.

"Steady, Miss Raymond," said the big young man, meeting her quickly and seizing her hands.

"You have heard something?"

"I have. I read that letter again. A thought struck me. I called up Dr. Blodgett on the long distance. I asked him a question——"

He halted in his speech, for Natalie wavered a little on her feet. But in a moment she recovered herself and looked at him with clear vision again.

"Tell me, Mr. Van Weir," she begged. "I can stand it."

"I asked him if he had noticed the hands of the man he said was mentally deficient—the seaman he said he had retained in the hospital as orderly."

"Yes?"

"And," said Mr. Van Weir, slowly and impressively, "Dr. Blodgett admitted that the man's hands had puzzled him. They were not the hands of a man who labored—especially a seaman's hands. *I want you to go on to Boston with me and see that man!*"

"My father!" gasped Natalie.

In a moment she was in a chair and Mr. Van Weir was holding a glass of water to her lips.

"Hold on! hold on, Miss Natalie!" he said, cheerfully. "It's a chance. That is all. And you've got to see your mother, and make your preparations for a journey at once. You need to pull yourself together, you know."

"Oh, Mr. Van Weir!" she ejaculated again.

"It's sudden, I know," he said, with a little chuckle. "And we'll have such sport with Mrs. Hackett. . . . Here she is now, God bless her!"

The old Irish woman bustled in.

"An' phat are yez doin' to Miss Nat'lie now?" she demanded. "Pshaw! git away wid that water, ye clumsy man—a spillin' it all over her best bib and tucker! Tell me what ye want Jenny Hackett for?" and she began patting Natalie's hand and soothing her in a most motherly way.

Mr. Van Weir went straight to the heart of his subject. And after Mrs. Hackett had first expressed her amazement, she listened calmly and sensibly enough to his plan.

Would she go with Miss Natalie to Boston? She'd go to the ends of the earth, she declared, although her idea of those same ends was rather vague.

But she would go! That was the main thing.

Mr. Van Weir had engaged berths on the midnight train out of the Grand Central Station. There was a deal to do, for it was already dark.

Natalie had to see her mother and—much against her will—she allowed Laura's understanding of the emergency to stand. Mrs. Raymond and the three younger girls believed Natalie's trip to Boston was connected with the magazine for which she worked.

"My brave girl!" said Mrs. Raymond, patting her oldest daughter's shoulder. "And how important you are getting to those people you work for—and you little more than a child!

"Ah, dear! I wish I could get up and take your place in the household. But I am a poor, useless thing——"

"Hush, hush, Mummy-kins!" commanded Natalie, striving to keep back the tears. "Don't say such things."

"I am afraid nothing will ever bring me out of bed again and upon my feet. I haven't the strength—I haven't the ambition," the poor woman complained.

In her heart Natalie was wondering if there was a chance at last to bring about that which would surely arouse her mother. If this man at the hospital——

She dared not let her mind linger on it. Had

it not been for the bustle and confusion of getting away she would have broken down herself.

She told her mother and Laura nothing about the day's great fortune; but she told Mr. Van Weir and insisted that he should keep a strict account of all the expenses, that she might settle with him at the end.

Laura—who dearly loved company—prepared a delicious supper for them, and Mrs. Hackett came back, green bonnet, reticule, gloves and all, and insisted upon waiting on the table, fully dressed as she was.

They were off at last, making a good connection for the Boston train, and Natalie and Mrs. Hackett went to bed in their section, although that good lady shied considerably at first at the idea of "slapin' on a pantry shelf."

Natalie was sure she would not be able to sleep, her thoughts ran riot so; but even before the train left the yards she was deep in slumber, and had but a hazy recollection of the entire ride.

Mr. Van Weir had advised them to sleep as long as they could, even after the train's arrival, for the porter would not awaken the lingering passengers until seven. But Natalie was astir and had made her toilet by six, and Mrs. Hackett was not far behind her.

"An' do yez mean to tell me we have got clane

THEY WERE OFF AT LAST. Page 284.

to Boston—an' me aslape?" she demanded of Natalie. "Sure the brick houses and the loike do be lukin' jest like N'York."

Mr. Van Weir did not hasten them. He pointed out the fact that it would be impossible to see Dr. Blodgett at the hospital before ten o'clock. But Natalie could barely control herself.

The editor was a great help to her, however. Without bringing her into the conversation much, or thrusting himself upon her, he kept the girl interested in what he talked about, or amused her with his conversation with Mrs. Hackett.

They went to breakfast at a Back Bay hotel and finally drove in a taxi to the hospital. The nearer they approached to the time and place of possible meeting with the mysterious man whose case had brought them to Boston, Natalie's hope withered.

And perhaps it was as well. It did not seem possible that her father, unknown and unable to identify himself, had been here all this time—since the previous July—and was now to be restored to her. Her mind, after all, could not grasp the wonder.

On arrival at the hospital Dr. Blodgett was expecting them and ushered them into his private office. He was a kindly man, and he showed himself to be deeply interested in the case of the

seaman from the *Sakonnet,* as he had been booked when brought to the institution.

"You know very well, Mr. Van Weir," explained the surgeon, "that many times men who are not used to hard labor, but can merely pass the physical examination, take jobs as stokers on these steamships. We judged he was one of the firemen who was knocked out when they mutinied.

"The purser was here but a few moments, and he professed to know none of the three members of the crew. Naturally, he had little to do in his official capacity with either seamen or firemen. Mr. Bowley, the passenger, of course he knew.

"When this fellow recovered from the shock he had received I noticed that there was something seriously wrong with him at once. He appeared to have no memory. Yet he can read and write, and is helpful enough about the wards. He is by no means lacking in a certain quality of intelligence.

"But his mind is in a haze—that is sure. He knows nothing about himself. We got to calling him Robert, and that seems to be as familiar to him as any name he ever heard. He says so himself.

"You see, there wasn't a scrap of paper on him. He had no coat, only a jumper. Nothing at all in his pockets with which to trace his real identity.

"When the lump on his head went down—that

bruise was as big as a goose-egg—there was no indentation in the skull. We cannot operate. If there is anything more the matter with his brain than ever has been the matter, it is because of the formation of a blood-clot. That clot may linger for years, or it may disappear suddenly."

"And what might bring about this sudden change in the man's condition?" asked Mr. Van Weir, knowing that Natalie was listening eagerly.

"Shock—either mental or physical. Another blow on the head might do it. That would be a dangerous experiment, however," said the surgeon, smiling grimly.

"Better, a mental shock. I am not prepared to offer any surety that *that* would be beneficial, however. We can but try. If the young lady wishes to see the man and make sure—— ?"

"Oh, yes! oh, yes!" gasped Natalie, clasping her hands.

The surgeon touched a bell and went on talking.

"These cases of loss of memory—we will not give them their hard names—are from many causes; and they have been cured in as many different ways. In Robert's condition we could not allow him to drift out into the world and be lost entirely, although he is physically able to take care of himself.

"But he clings to us, here, too; he says he

realizes that we are the connecting link between his present existence and his old life. I fancy he has dreams of that old life that trouble him. He is on the verge, many times, I am sure, of bursting through the barrier between his present life and the old——"

The door of the office opened hesitatingly and a man came shuffling in, in the list slippers of the hospital ward.

CHAPTER XXIX

BACK FROM THE LOST LAND

He was not a fleshy man, and his hair was graying fast, and was thin on top of his head. It seemed to have been shaved on a spot over his left temple, and in that place the hair was perfectly white, giving his head a strangely piebald appearance.

But there was a glow of health in the man's cheeks and when he glanced around the room in a questioning manner, as he closed the door softly behind him, his gray-blue eyes seemed bright and intelligent enough.

"They said you wanted me, Doctor?" he said, in a low voice.

It was when he spoke that Natalie screamed. She staggered forward a step with both hands held out. Her eyes devoured the strangely changing expression on the hospital orderly's face.

He stared at her. His hands went to his head, and he clasped them there as though the pulses in his temples were throbbing to the bursting point. And for a full minute he did not speak, nor seem to breathe, nor take his eyes from the girl.

"Father! Father!" called Natalie at last. "Father!"

"I—guess—that's—my—Natalie," gasped the man, jerkily.

And then he would have reeled and fallen had not Dr. Blodgett and Mr. Van Weir both sprung to his aid and eased him down upon the surgeon's couch.

"All right! All right!" exclaimed Dr. Blodgett, with suppressed excitement. "It's mere syncope. He'll be back in a moment. You stand right there, young lady, where his eyes can rest upon you first."

Meanwhile he worked over the unconscious man skillfully. In five minutes Mr. Raymond's eyelids fluttered, he uttered a long sigh, and opened his eyes wide again.

"Your mother, child!" he gasped. "She—she——"

"We are all right—every one of us—Mother, Laura, Rose, Lucille, and I," declared Natalie, and fell upon her knees by his side.

"How—how you've grown, Natalie," he whispered, as she stroked his hand.

His eyes wandered to Mrs. Hackett, and suddenly he smiled.

"God bless me!" he said, with some animation. "There's Jenny Hackett."

"Praise hivin!" cried the good Irish woman. "Did I iver hope to see this day, Mr. Frank." But then, warned by a look from the doctor, she amended her speech by adding: "Sure, I niver seen ye lookin' finer, Mr. Frank, niver in me whole loife!"

He gave her little attention, but was looking, with puzzled manner, at Van Weir and Dr. Blodgett.

"I do not seem to remember you gentlemen," he whispered. "Doctors, I presume?"

"There," said Dr. Blodgett, smiling, "he's lost a friend already, you see. He and I have been quite chummy of late. Don't you remember me, Robert?"

Mr. Raymond's eyes clouded a bit, and he shook his head.

"It seems not," he said. "Yet, perhaps I *should* remember you. But you have my name wrong, sir. It is Frank; not Robert."

"There it is," said the doctor, in a low tone to Van Weir. "He may some time remember this part of his life in the hospital; but possibly not. Listen."

"I seem to remember nothing after that trouble on the ship— Why, did the poor old *Sakonnet* sink after all?"

"She did indeed," said Dr. Blodgett, cheerfully.

"And those fellows began to fight. I remember. One fellow . . . Ha! he must have struck me with that bar."

"A nasty blow," said Dr. Blodgett. "You knew nothing till they brought you ashore and we got you here in a hospital."

"Ah—yes—a hospital, of course," said Mr. Raymond. "And now I can go home? Of course, your mother is sadly worried, Natalie. But I remember sending my wallet and order-book to the firm by Mr. Middler. Do you suppose he and his wife were lucky enough to be saved?"

"Oh, father, that wallet was delivered to Favor & Murch long ago," said Natalie before Dr. Blodgett could stop her.

"Long ago? Have I been in the hospital long?" he gasped.

"And we shall keep you a bit longer, old man," said Dr. Blodgett, cheerfully, but firmly, and approaching with a sedative. "Drink this; then go to sleep; and this young lady can see and talk with you later."

He hustled them all out of the room then and turned his office for the time being into a private ward. While Mr. Raymond slept they made their plans for the immediate future.

Dr. Blodgett would not hear of the patient being removed immediately. Mr. Van Weir had

to return to New York at once; but Mrs. Hackett quickly agreed to stay with Natalie for a time, at least.

A room was obtained for the good woman and Natalie in the neighborhood, and Dr. Blodgett assured the girl that she should be with her father, and help to cure him, every day.

But this state of observation under the surgeon's eye did not last for long. Dr. Blodgett merely wished to be sure that the sudden shock of coming back to his own old mind and identity had not shaken Mr. Raymond physically, as well.

Gradually Mr. Raymond came to realize the time that had elapsed since his injury aboard the sinking steamer. He recalled the incidents of that time very clearly, and remembered Mr. Middler, Mr. Orton, and his little girl—all the incidents, in fact, that had so slowly come to Natalie's knowledge through the weary months since the time of the wreck.

Now, Natalie knew, she had never believed her father lost at sea. She had been urged forward in her quest, all the time, by some inexplicable feeling that the plain and naturally "sensible" explanation of his disappearance was not the right one.

"I felt you must be somewhere waiting for me,

Father!" she cried, with her head on his shoulder. "It—it's what has kept me up, many a time, when it looked as though I couldn't go a step farther."

He had heard much of her story now. And he was proud of his daughter—his "oldest of four."

And what man would not have been proud to have such a daughter? She had been faithful, she had worked hard, and aside from the helping hands held out to her—notably Pete Darby's—Natalie had succeeded in many, many tasks she had undertaken.

"And a writer!" Mr. Raymond marveled. "I knew you had the talent, Natalie. But for a girl like you to earn twenty dollars a week on a magazine . . . Why, it is really wonderful. And the stories!"

"I don't know that I am a success as a story writer," interposed Natalie, wincing at the thought of the non-success of her book. "But I guess I have talent enough for hack-work on a magazine."

Mrs. Hackett went home after a day or two, being instructed to carry no news of Mr. Raymond's discovery to the family; but to let them think that it was business still that kept Natalie away.

At the end of ten days, however, Dr. Blodgett was willing for the patient to leave the hospital. Nor did Mr. Raymond look much like a sick man. Only, he had aged in appearance by many years, and it grieved Natalie to see it.

CHATER XXX

A FORECAST

Mr. Raymond went to Mrs. Hackett's when they arrived in Burlingboro. Her little tenement was right behind the Raymond cottage, on the back street. It was Natalie who had to break the news to Mrs. Raymond that the lost one was found.

But by Dr. Blodgett's advice the girl called in Dr. Protest, their family physician, letting him into the secret, and when he had expressed his delighted surprise he repeated what he had said months before, when first trouble had come upon the Raymond family and Mrs. Raymond had taken to her bed:

"I never yet knew a case where joy killed!"

It was evening, however, and Mrs. Raymond expressed some surprise that the physician should have called so late in the day.

"Wanted to see just how you were getting on, Mrs. Raymond," said Dr. Protest, cheerfully. "I might be called away to-morrow, and haven't seen you for nearly a week, you know.

"Ah—ha! Famous! I believe you will get

up on your feet shortly. You need a tonic of a kind that I cannot prescribe for you."

"What is that, Doctor?" asked the invalid, wearily.

"Some shock—some joyful surprise. Something to lift you out of yourself, my dear woman. And I believe our smart Natalie, here, who does so much, can arrange even *that,*" he added, significantly.

"The dear child does all she can," said Mrs. Raymond; but the doctor tiptoed out of the room and sent one of Mrs. Hackett's youngsters flying across the yards for Mr. Raymond.

The three younger Raymond girls were already with their recovered father at the neighbor's house; they trooped back with him, but were warned to remain downstairs and keep as quiet as mice. Mr. Raymond went softly up to his wife's room and Natalie met him.

She was in tears, but she smiled at him happily.

"She is waiting for you, Father," she whispered; "but she is asleep. I did not tell her you were so near, but that you were coming home. You can slip in there and sit by her if you will promise to be—a—very—good—boy!" the last words being punctuated by kisses.

"My brave little daughter," he replied, returning the kiss. "Father is proud of you."

Then he opened the door softly and tiptoed in. She saw him slip into the chair by the bedside and bend over the fair, if somewhat worn, face upon the pillow.

And then the tears flooded Natalie's eyes and blinded her; and she closed the door.

Dr. Protest was quite right. Joy is not a shock that kills. In Mrs. Raymond's case, the joyful reappearance of her husband seemed to be just what the invalid needed.

From the hour she awoke and found her hand resting in her husband's warm palm she began to mend, and it was not many months before she had regained all she had lost in health, and was on the road to complete recovery.

But this was in the future. Right at this time, in addition to her father's home-coming, Natalie experienced another—and to her mind—a most astonishing and unexpected piece of good fortune.

She had been so busy the day she returned and the next forenoon that she had no time to even think of her department work—and it was pressing. Her absence in Boston had set her back nearly a week on the magazine writing.

So she warned the children to keep away from her room, went in and locked her door, and uncovered her typewriter. And as she prepared to

sit down to it she saw a letter lying on her table—a letter that had not been opened.

She picked it up curiously, saw idly the name of a publishing firm printed in the corner of the envelope, and even then did not dream what the letter might contain. It had evidently lain here several days, and Laura had forgotten to tell her about it.

She slit the flap of the envelope, drew out the brief letter, and read it almost at a glance. Yet, those few brief lines spelled Success for Natalie Raymond!

"Her Way Out" had been read and approved by the readers of the publishing house. The writer even mentioned the fact that there was a freshness and originality about the manuscript which gave him great confidence in its ultimate success.

He mentioned the fact that the house would be glad to issue it in the fall, and asked her to call and sign a contract, offering a substantial sum as advance royalties.

She was really a success as a writer! Her name would appear upon the title page of a real book.

With the letter in her hand, Natalie sat and dreamed a little. And who had a better right?

Perhaps, in time, she might become as well known in her chosen field of literature as Miss

Jarrold. She was capable of doing something better than hack-work on the magazine.

It was a satisfaction! The glow that she had felt while she wrote the first of "Her Way Out" returned to her. She felt suddenly as though, now that everything was running so smoothly again, she might try another book. Already the dim, glimmering outline of a plot was forming in her active mind.

Her worries for the future were mainly past. They had money in the bank, thanks to that odd Pete Darby. Rough as that young man was on the surface, he had been a good friend to Natalie.

And she had made and held other friends during her long campaign of independence. How kind Mr. Kester had been to her—and the girls in the store where she had worked.

And Mr. Franklin, the editor of the *Banner*—why, if he had not so encouraged her and felt such confidence in her ultimate success, she might never have completed "Her Way Out."

And good Mrs. Hackett! The cheeriest and most helpful body in the world. And—as Mr. Van Weir declared—the "finest chaperon in the business!"

She smiled when she thought of Harvey Van Weir. And for a little her mind ran upon the

many helpful and kindly acts the editor of *Our Twentieth Century Home* had done for her.

It was really he who had brought about her father's home-coming. His thought, when he had read Dr. Blodgett's letter a second time, had been the clue to the whole mystery of the lost man.

And he was so splendid! So cheerful, and—and—yes!—handsome——

Natalie sprang up with her cheeks in a sudden glow and ran into her mother's room to tell the good news of the accepted book. Just to think—she, a girl of less than seventeen, having a real book accepted for publication!

Of course her parents were doubly proud of her. And Laura thought it was the finest thing that ever had happened.

"That cat, Estelle Mayberry, won't have anything to say about you *now,* I guess," said the outspoken Laura. "She's been talking about us a good bit, I hear; but this will shut her up, I hope."

"Oh, dear, we won't mind about gossip any more," said Natalie, mildly.

Even the "charity frocks" seemed a small cross to Natalie Raymond now.

Laura flew over to tell Jim and soon old Mose pushed the crippled youth into the Raymonds' yard in his wheel-chair.

"Just the bulliest thing that ever happened, Nat! I knew it was in you," declared young Hurley.

"Everything is turning out splendidly, Jim," she told him, giving him her hand. "And you and your mother are not the least of our friends deserving of our gratitude," she added, softly.

"Oh, now, Natalie! don't you say a word about that," said Jim, and he hobbled off on his crutches to find Laura.

Natalie had been glad to notice that, for some time, Jim and Laura had become much better chums than ever she and Jim had been. And that was as it should be, for the cripple perhaps found it hard at times to be cheerful, and Laura's exuberant spirits were helpful to him.

Natalie took her publisher's letter to Mr. Franklin before she went to the city that week, and the *Banner* editor was just as delighted with her good fortune as Natalie knew he would be.

"What did I say? What did I say?" demanded the old gentleman, over and over again. "And you hit the second house you tried! Why, child, you are a genius—you'll make your mark.

"But I claim some credit. I am your literary godfather—remember that."

"I shall never forget your encouragement and help, dear Mr. Franklin," she assured him.

But it was with Harvey Van Weir that she discussed the details of the contract the publishers offered, and that young man, well-versed in literary matters, advised her well. And he was enthusiastic, too.

"I told 'em you were a find, Miss Natalie," he said, with his boyish laugh. "Of course, we editors always pride ourselves on our literary finds; you will be, I am sure, the very brightest star in my crown."

"You praise me too much, Mr. Van Weir. You'll make me too conceited to live," laughed Natalie.

Yet secretly *his* praise pleased her more than any other person's commendation.

Mr. Van Weir insisted upon a little luncheon in clebration of her good fortune and they talked long over the table in the corner of the quiet restaurant which they both liked so well because of its associations. This was the place where they had first lunched with the "borrowed chaperon."

He prophesied great things in literature for Natalie that day. He saw her book already a success, and made *her* see it, too. They even discussed the new plot Natalie was hazily evolving for a second long story.

Oh, yes! that young man Van Weir was a splen-

did prophet. He said he was inspired that day and could look into the future like any seer!

But there was one prophecy he did not make. Perhaps Harvey Van Weir saw its culmination quite as clearly as he did the results of Natalie's future literary work, but he was too wise to speak of it just at this time.

He saw a second desk in his big office at which his first assistant would sit and help him in the more intimate work of editing the magazine; and this assistant looked strangely (to his mind's eye) like Natalie Raymond—only a Natalie grown some years older—and even prettier.

But, dearer yet would be the tie between the two—a tie that would be lasting, in Harvey Van Weir's determination.

And Harvey Van Weir was a very determined young man.

THE END

SOMETHING ABOUT

AMY BELL MARLOWE

AND HER BOOKS FOR GIRLS

In these days, when the printing presses are turning out so many books for girls that are good, bad and indifferent, it is refreshing to come upon the works of such a gifted authoress as Miss Amy Bell Marlowe, who is now under contract to write exclusively for Messrs. Grosset & Dunlap.

In many ways Miss Marlowe's books may be compared with those of Miss Alcott and Mrs. Meade, but all are thoroughly modern and wholly American in scene and action. Her plots, while never improbable, are exceedingly clever, and her girlish characters are as natural as they are interesting.

On the following pages will be found a list of Miss Marlowe's books. Every girl in our land ought to read these fresh and wholesome tales. They are to be found at all booksellers. Each volume is handsomely illustrated and bound in cloth, stamped in colors. Published by Grosset & Dunlap, New York. A free catalogue of Miss Marlowe's books may be had for the asking.

"I DON'T see any way out!"

It was Natalie's mother who said that, after the awful news had been received that Mr. Raymond had been lost in a shipwreck on the Atlantic. Natalie was the oldest of four children, and the family was left with but scant means for support.

"I've got to do something—yes, I've just got to!" Natalie said to herself, and what the brave girl did is well related in "The Oldest of Four; Or, Natalie's Way Out." In this volume we find Natalie with a strong desire to become a writer. At first she contributes to a local paper, but soon she aspires to larger things, and comes in contact with the editor of a popular magazine. This man becomes her warm friend, and not only aids her in a literary way but also helps in a hunt for the missing Mr. Raymond.

Natalie has many ups and downs, and has to face more than one bitter disappointment. But she is a plucky girl through and through.

"One of the brightest girls' stories ever penned," one well-known author has said of this book, and we agree with him. Natalie is a thoroughly lovable character, and one long to be remembered. Published as are all the Amy Bell Marlowe books, by Grosset & Dunlap, New York, and for sale by all booksellers. Ask your dealer to let you look the volume over.

THE GIRLS OF HILLCREST FARM

"WE'LL go to the old farm, and we'll take boarders! We can fix the old place up, and, maybe, make money!"

The father of the two girls was broken down in health and a physician had recommended that he go to the country, where he could get plenty of fresh air and sunshine. An aunt owned an abandoned farm and she said the family could live on this and use the place as they pleased. It was great sport moving and getting settled, and the boarders offered one surprise after another. There was a mystery about the old farm, and a mystery concerning one of the boarders, and how the girls got to the bottom of affairs is told in detail in the story, which is called, "The Girls of Hillcrest Farm; Or, The Secret of the Rocks."

It was great fun to move to the farm, and once the girls had the scare of their lives. And they attended a great "vendue" too.

"I just had to write that story—I couldn't help it," said Miss Marlowe, when she handed in the manuscript. "I knew just such a farm when I was a little girl, and oh! what fun I had there! And there was a mystery about that place, too!"

Published, like all the Marlowe books, by Grosset & Dunlap, New York, and for sale wherever good books are sold.

A LITTLE MISS NOBODY

"Oh, she's only a little nobody! Don't have anything to do with her!"

How often poor Nancy Nelson heard those words, and how they cut her to the heart. And the saying was true, she *was* a nobody. She had no folks, and she did not know where she had come from. All she did know was that she was at a boarding school and that a lawyer paid her tuition bills and gave her a mite of spending money.

"I am going to find out who I am, and where I came from," said Nancy to herself, one day, and what she did, and how it all ended, is absorbingly related in "A Little Miss Nobody; Or, With the Girls of Pinewood Hall." Nancy made a warm friend of a poor office boy who worked for that lawyer, and this boy kept his eyes and ears open and learned many things.

The book tells much about boarding school life, of study and fun mixed, and of a great race on skates. Nancy made some friends as well as enemies, and on more than one occasion proved that she was "true blue" in the best meaning of that term.

Published by Grosset & Dunlap, New York, and for sale by booksellers everywhere. If you desire a catalogue of Amy Bell Marlowe books send to the publishers for it and it will come free.

THE GIRL FROM SUNSET RANCH

HELEN was very thoughtful as she rode along the trail from Sunset Ranch to the View. She had lost her father but a month before, and he had passed away with a stain on his name—a stain of many years' standing, as the girl had just found out.

"I am going to New York and I am going to clear his name!" she resolved, and just then she saw a young man dashing along, close to the edge of a cliff. Over he went, and Helen, with no thought of the danger to herself, went to the rescue.

Then the brave Western girl found herself set down at the Grand Central Terminal in New York City. She knew not which way to go or what to do. Her relatives, who thought she was poor and ignorant, had refused to even meet her. She had to fight her way along from the start, and how she did this, and won out, is well related in "The Girl from Sunset Ranch; Or, Alone in a Great City."

This is one of the finest of Amy Bell Marlowe's books, with its true-to-life scenes of the plains and mountains, and of the great metropolis. Helen is a girl all readers will love from the start.

Published by Grosset & Dunlap, New York, and for sale by booksellers everywhere.

WYN'S CAMPING DAYS

"Oh, girls, such news!" cried Wynifred Mallory to her chums, one day. "We can go camping on Lake Honotonka! Isn't it grand!"

It certainly was, and the members of the Go-Ahead Club were delighted. Soon they set off, with their boy friends to keep them company in another camp not far away. Those boys played numerous tricks on the girls, and the girls retaliated, you may be sure. And then Wyn did a strange girl a favor, and learned how some ancient statues of rare value had been lost in the lake, and how the girl's father was accused of stealing them.

"We must do all we can for that girl," said Wyn. But this was not so easy, for the girl campers had many troubles of their own. They had canoe races, and one of them fell overboard and came close to drowning, and then came a big storm, and a nearby tree was struck by lightning.

"I used to love to go camping when a girl, and I love to go yet," said Miss Marlowe, in speaking of this tale, which is called, "Wyn's Camping Days; Or, The Outing of the Go-Ahead Club." "I think all girls ought to know the pleasures of summer life under canvas."

A book that ought to be in the hands of all girls. Issued by Grosset & Dunlap, New York, and for sale by booksellers everywhere.

THE OUTDOOR GIRLS SERIES

By LAURA LEE HOPE

Author of the "Bobbsey Twin Books" and "Bunny Brown" Series.

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One of the girls becomes the proud possessor of a motor boat and invites her club members to take a trip down the river to Rainbow Lake, a beautiful sheet of water lying between the mountains.

THE OUTDOOR GIRLS IN A MOTOR CAR
Or The Haunted Mansion of Shadow Valley.

One of the girls has learned to run a big motor car, and she invites the club to go on a tour to visit some distant relatives. On the way they stop at a deserted mansion and make a surprising discovery.

THE OUTDOOR GIRLS IN A WINTER CAMP
Or Glorious Days on Skates and Ice Boats.

In this story, the scene is shifted to a winter season. The girls have some jolly times skating and ice boating, and visit a hunters' camp in the big woods.

THE OUTDOOR GIRLS IN FLORIDA.
Or Wintering in the Sunny South.

The parents of one of the girls have bought an orange grove in Florida, and her companions are invited to visit the place. They take a trip into the interior, where several unusual things happen.

THE OUTDOOR GIRLS AT OCEAN VIEW
Or The Box that Was Found in the Sand.

The girls have great fun and solve a mystery while on an outing along the New England coast.

THE OUTDOOR GIRLS ON PINE ISLAND
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Or The Proof on the Film.

A tale of winter adventures in the wilderness, showing how the photo-play actors sometimes suffer.

THE MOVING PICTURE GIRLS UNDER THE PALMS
Or Lost in the Wilds of Florida.

How they went to the land of palms, played many parts in dramas before the camera; were lost, and aided others who were also lost.

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